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What Happens When the Standard for Openness Goes Unmet in Romantic Relationships?: Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Analyses of Stress, Coping, and Individual and Relationship Consequences

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by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

August, 2013

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father for giving everything to my education, for serving as a model of hard work and passion for your craft, and for being forever curious and kind. This “Ph.O.” is for you.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is a reality because of many people in my life who have provided me with guidance, support, love, and patience over the years. In truth, this dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Vangelisti, for helping me become a stronger writer, thinker, and researcher. You are always available to listen to an idea, give advice, or read a draft. I am forever grateful for your sage wisdom and thoughtful feedback. Many thanks, Dr. Daly, for giving me so many opportunities to shine and for being my advocate. You trusted me with so many decisions—big and small—and I will always cherish my time assisting with 315M. I would also like to thank René Dailey for bringing me on to her research team and not only showing me what it is to do great research, but also teaching me how to do it. Your confidence in me means so much and I have really enjoyed working with you. I also want to express my gratitude to Erin Donovan-Kicken, who inspires me to ask thoughtful questions and pursue interesting research. Our project is one of my favorites because it helped me realize what I am most passionate about. Dr. Huston, thank you for serving on my committee and for your last seminar. I am so fortunate to learn from such a great scholar who challenges me to think "bigger" and more deeply about relationships and how we study them.

Next, I would not have gotten this far without the help of amazing friends who always help me to celebrate the victories and recover from the defeats. I am especially grateful for Shannon Johnson and Nick (and Lesley) Brody. Also, special thanks go to my long-time friends outside of the academy, who give me perspective and unconditional

love. Tara Jepsen, Tapias, Fenstermakers, and Ballards, I am so excited for what is next in our lives.

Last, I would like to thank my wonderful family. Dad and Mom, words cannot express how much I admire your hard work and appreciate your encouragement and confidence in me. I am especially grateful that you have always given me the freedom to go out into the world so that I could learn, explore, and grow. I am also so fortunate and thankful to have an amazing husband who keeps me grounded, believes in my dreams, and supports my decisions. Josh, I feel like I can do anything with you by my side. Finally, I am so lucky to have a huge, loving, and fun family. The Mooneys are a wild bunch, and I adore every minute of our time together.

What Happens When the Standard for Openness Goes Unmet in Romantic Relationships?: Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Analyses of Stress, Coping, and Individual and Relationship Consequences

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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Individuals expect openness in their romantic relationships, and this standard, known as the *standard for openness*, is the focus of this project. Currently, little empirical evidence describes what individuals do to deal with any dissatisfaction, anger, and disappointment they feel toward their partners and relationships when standards, such as that for openness, go unfulfilled (Boldero et al., 2009). Based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, this project's purpose was to address limitations in existing research by exploring the stress elicited when the standard for openness goes unmet, identifying the coping strategies individuals engage in when faced with this stress, and assessing the consequences of coping efforts for individuals and their relationships over time. Individuals in newly dating relationships (N = 203) responded to weekly questionnaires over the course of six weeks. Findings from cross-sectional analyses of Week 1 data revealed that exiting and using humor partially mediated the relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and relational satisfaction, and escaping fully mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction. Further, exiting, modeling, escaping, and reframing partially mediated the

relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and mental well-being. Longitudinal analyses using data from all six weeks failed to support predictions that relational satisfaction and mental well-being were related to discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and stress the following week.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In Western societies, individuals expect openness in their relationships. This is perhaps not surprising considering how widely-cited it is that being open, disclosing, and sharing (private) information are integral to the development, maintenance, and even decline, of relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Baxter, 1986; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Sprecher, 1987). Indeed, expressiveness/openness is one of the most desirable attributes a partner can have, and individuals report that it is extremely important to obtain a partner who exhibits their desired levels of expressiveness/openness (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Importantly, individuals note a lack of openness as a primary reason their romantic relationship dissolves (Baxter, 1986).

As a critical aspect of relationships, this expectation for openness, known as the standard for openness, is the focus of this project. Openness is one of many standards individuals have for their partners and relationships, and it is reported to be one of the most important (Caughlin, 2003; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Standards, or characteristics individuals believe partners and relationships should have, provide a criteria by which individuals evaluate the quality of their relationships (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Put another way, standards serve as "reference points" (Baucom et al., 1996a, p. 210) for assessing whether partners and relationships are "living up to" individuals' expectations. Individuals who endorse a standard for openness believe that partners should be willing and comfortable disclosing their needs, wants, feelings, emotions, and things that are bothering them (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997).

Research has consistently found that individuals in relationships are more satisfied when standards, such as that for openness, are met or exceeded (Alexander, 2004; Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996b; Caughlin, 2003; Hall, Larson, & Watts, 2011; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Similarly, when individuals feel they cannot speak to close others (e.g., dating partners or family members) about their thoughts and feelings, or that others are hiding information from

them, they report less satisfaction with the relationship (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Golish, 2000; Vangelisti, 1994) and decreased intimacy (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Despite the importance of openness in relationships and its influence on relational quality, individuals can struggle with being too open, or not open enough, in their relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 2002). In short, the standard for openness is often unmet, particularly in romantic relationships (Alexander, 2004; Baucom et al., 1996b; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997).

Because violations of openness are relatively common in romantic relationships, a practically and theoretically important question to ask is, "What happens when the standard for openness goes unmet?" Currently, little empirical evidence describes what individuals do to deal with any dissatisfaction, anger, and disappointment they feel toward their partners and relationships when standards, such as that for openness, go unfulfilled (Boldero et al., 2009). Some research shows that individuals ruminate about their partner's lack of openness, leading to greater dissatisfaction (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2012). Other research suggests individuals engage in various coping strategies (Alexander, 2004, 2008; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). Despite these findings, more research is needed to explain how individuals deal with the dissatisfaction they experience when their standard for openness goes unmet. Understanding individuals' coping experiences could refine and validate current understandings of how individuals respond to unmet standards, and more particularly, to an unmet standard for openness. Further, identifying the ways in which individuals cope with violations of the openness standard can shed light on how they manage to stay in relationships despite having this important standard go unmet. That is, some individuals may be able to cope in ways that protect them from the negative outcomes associated with violations of the openness standard. Identifying these coping strategies could help couples maintain more satisfying relationships.

In order to understand what happens when the standard for openness goes unmet in romantic relationships, it is important to not only recognize how individuals respond by coping, but also explain why they choose to use particular coping strategies. As the function of coping is

to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress could provide a theoretical explanation for why individuals respond in certain ways to violations of openness. Some individuals may not engage in coping if they do not perceive a lack of openness to be stressful; others may do a great deal of coping in response to the stress they attribute to the situation. The degree to which individuals cope and the strategies they use to do so depend on the degree to which they perceive the current situation as interfering with their goals or violating their expectations (Lazarus, 1999). Thus, when partners are not as open as individuals expect them to be, some may experience greater stress and engage in more coping, while others may not appraise the situation as stressful and are less likely to cope as a result.

Despite its importance as a theoretical linkage between violations and coping, stress has largely been missing from previous literature on coping with unmet relational standards. Instead, research has either explored the emotional consequences of, or the coping efforts associated with, unmet relational standards. That is, one line of research has found that when individuals perceive their "should" or "ought to" standards are not being met, they report feeling more agitated and dejected (Boldero et al., 2009). Also, having one's partner avoid during a conflict-inducing conversation is associated with rumination about it the following week (Afifi et al., 2012). The other line of research has focused on the coping efforts associated with unmet relational standards (Alexander, 2004, 2008; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). Individuals cope using a number of strategies that vary along several dimensions, such as the locus for action (e.g., relationship vs. network) and the focus of the coping strategy (e.g., self vs. other; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). Thus, a major goal of this project is to unite these two disparate, yet theoretically-related lines of research on unmet standards to not only understand which coping strategies individuals employ when faced with violations of openness, but also explore why they choose to cope in those ways. Also, including stress in a model of coping with an unmet openness standard provides a richer understanding of this experience; a violation of openness not only may threaten relational quality, but can also be an extremely emotional and distressing experience (Afifi et al., 2012; Boldero et al., 2009).

Finally, in order to understand what happens when the standard for openness goes unmet in romantic relationships, it is important to assess the influence of stress and coping on individuals and their relationships. If coping with the stress associated with violations of openness is not effective, what does this mean for individuals and their relationships over time? Existing research is largely cross-sectional, and therefore has not been able to determine if and to what extent coping buffers the negative impact of unmet standards on relational satisfaction. Therefore, this project takes a longitudinal approach in order to assess the mediating effects of both stress and coping on the relationship between an unmet openness standard and relational and individual outcomes. Studies linking the standard for openness and topic avoidance to satisfaction have assumed that a lack of openness precedes dissatisfaction (e.g., Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Instead, outcomes associated with an unmet openness standard may influence how people perceive their partner's openness subsequently, which in turn influences their stress, coping, and outcomes.

Taking the limitations of current research into consideration, and based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, this project's purpose was to explore the stress elicited when the standard for openness goes unmet, identify the coping strategies individuals engage in when faced with this stress, and assess the consequences of coping efforts for individuals and their relationships over time. Exploring the stress and coping behaviors of individuals in response to an unmet openness standard can shed light on how individuals navigate a critical, yet complex aspect of romantic relationships.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Rationale

The following literature review and rationale is composed of four sections. Throughout, it is argued that a stress and coping perspective helps explain why (i.e., because of stress) and how (i.e., through the use of coping strategies) individuals respond to an unmet openness standard. Thus, following a broad conceptualization of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, the first section explores the outcomes of stress and coping with an unmet openness standard, proposing both individual and relational consequences. The second and third sections define and apply stress and coping, respectively, to the experience of an unmet openness standard. Finally, the last section argues for the importance of taking a longitudinal approach in this study. Within each section, relevant hypotheses and research questions are posited, with the ultimate goal of assessing the consequences of both stress and coping with an unmet openness standard for individuals and their relationships over time.

Stress and Coping with an Unfulfilled Standard for Openness

Developed over the last 50 years, Lazarus and colleagues' theory of psychological stress and coping identifies two major processes individuals go through when faced with stress: cognitive appraisals and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is through cognitive appraisals that individuals assess the degree to which events are incongruent with their goals and violate important expectations; they consider the relevance of the situation, as well as their ability to deal with it, which in turn has the potential to elicit stress. When individuals believe the demands of the situation exceed their resources to manage it, stress ensues (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Then, as a way of managing stress, individuals engage in coping, which can have short- and long-term consequences for themselves and their relationships.

Outcomes Associated with Stress and Coping with an Unmet Openness Standard

From a stress and coping perspective, individuals engage in coping not only to deal with the immediate stress and emotions they experience, but also to protect themselves from the more severe and enduring consequences of stress for themselves and their relationships. Indeed,

research has consistently found that stress and coping in relationships has an impact on individual and relational well-being, especially in the long-term term, and can undermine relational quality (i.e., more negativity and less positivity, sexual conflict) and increase the likelihood that the relationship will dissolve (see Randall & Bodenmann, 2009, for a review). In particular, this study focuses on two outcomes relevant to stress and coping with an unmet openness standard: relational satisfaction and individual mental well-being.

First, the link between standards and relational satisfaction is well-established. As standards serve an evaluative function, individuals are more satisfied (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997; Alexander, 2004) and report greater marital adjustment (Baucom, et al., 1996b) and relational quality (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999) when standards are met or exceeded. Moreover, topic avoidance is linked to relationship dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Golish, 2000) and decreased intimacy (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Thus, a greater negative discrepancy between the openness a person expects and the openness he or she receives from a partner should be associated with lower relational satisfaction.

Second, the literature on stress and coping suggests coping has consequences for the individual beyond his or her satisfaction with the relationship. Specifically, decades of research have found that stress and coping in relationships has an impact on individuals' psychological well-being (see Randall & Bodenmann, 2009, for a review). For example, research on coping and health outcomes consistently supports the importance of social support in buffering stress (as coping) in relationships (Thoits, 1995, 2011). Couples who deal with stress together experience better mental health outcomes (Badr, Carmack, Kashy, Christofanilli, & Revenson, 2010). Conversely, hiding feelings from a partner and denying worry can take a particularly heavy toll on an individual's psychological well-being (Ben-Zur, Gilbar & Lev, 2001; Coyne & Smith, 1991). Important to this study, research has found that discrepancies in forgiveness, emotional resources, and decision-making between partners negatively influence individual well-being (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999; Paleari, Regalla, & Fincham, 2011).

A plausible example of an individual dealing with an unmet openness standard can illustrate the impact stress and coping can have on individual mental well-being: A woman may have a high standard for openness that is not being met in her relationship. This discrepancy between the openness she expects from her partner and the openness her partner exhibits causes her a great deal of stress, anxiety, and disappointment, with which she copes the best she feels she can. She copes by questioning her standard; she tells herself that her standard is too high, that she is asking too much of her partner. She also copes by making excuses for her partner's avoidance and even blaming herself for his behavior. Over time, because her standard is not being met and she unable to manage the stress effectively, she becomes less satisfied—not only with her relationship, but also with herself; her self-esteem decreases and she feels a little more depressed than usual. During this process she has never made it known to her partner that she desires more openness, though the experience has had negative effects on her mental health.

In sum, existing research suggests stress and coping with violations of openness can have deleterious effects on relationships and individuals within them. In order to assess these consequences on relational quality and individual mental well-being, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: A greater discrepancy between individuals' standard for openness and the degree to which partners fulfill that standard is:

a) negatively associated with relational satisfaction.

b) negatively associated with individuals' mental well-being.

STRESS

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition of stress focuses on the individual in relation to his or her environment. Psychological stress occurs when the "relationship between the person and the environment is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (p. 21). The experience of "stress" is the result of both appraisals and their accompanying emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1999).

Specifically, Lazarus (1991) identifies 15 core relational themes that connect emotional experiences to particular appraisals. It is important to emphasize that while appraisals are conceived as a cause of emotion, the two are often experienced simultaneously because appraisal and emotion processes happen rapidly and unconsciously (Lazarus, 1999). Rather than connecting discrete appraisals to specific emotions, which is not how stressors are experienced (i.e., processing one appraisal at a time), individuals instead synthesize appraisals into a more general meaning (Lazarus, 1999), and this meaning is experienced as emotion. Thus, emotions indicate the presence or absence of stress; they "provide a dramatic plot" that gives information about how the individual has appraised the situation (Lazarus, 1999, p. 34).

For example, the emotion of anger is associated with perceiving that a demeaning offense has been committed against one's self or those one cares about (Lazarus, 1991). Lazarus (1991) identified other patterns of appraisals and their corresponding emotion: anxiety (i.e., facing uncertain, existential threat), fright (i.e., an immediate, concrete and overwhelming physical danger), guilt (i.e., having transgressed a moral imperative), shame (i.e., failing to live up to an ego ideal), sadness (i.e., having experienced an irrevocable loss), envy (i.e., wanting what someone else has), jealousy (i.e., resenting a third party for loss or threat to another's affection or favor), happiness (i.e., making reasonable progress toward the realization of a goal), pride (i.e., enhancement of one's ego), relief (i.e., distressing goal-incongruent condition that has changed for the better or gone away), hope (i.e., fearing the worst by yearning for better), love (i.e., desiring or participating in affection), gratitude (i.e., appreciation for an altruistic gift that provides personal benefit), compassion (i.e., being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help).

It may be apparent how the negative emotions listed above—anger, envy, jealousy, guilt, anxiety, fright, shame, and sadness—are related to stress. In fact, these negative emotions are considered "stress emotions" (Lazarus, 1999). It may be more difficult, however, to see how those emotions generally regarded as positive (e.g., happiness, love, and compassion) are associated with stress. For example, it may seem contradictory to consider relief as stress;

however, it is important to recognize that all of the emotions described above are associated individuals' goals and wants, which are impetuses for stress. Thus, stress is not only the presence of the "stress emotions," but may also be the lack of the positive emotions. In the current project, when individuals perceive their partner is not fulfilling their expectations for openness, the ensuing stress may manifest as greater anger and disappointment and less happiness and hope, for example.

While research has not explicitly linked stress and emotions to the experience of an unmet openness standard, several bodies of literature do tie Lazarus' conceptions of emotions to unfulfilled expectations in relationships. For example, research on unmet relational standards has generally found that when individuals perceive their "should" or "ought to" standards are not being met, they report feeling more agitated and dejected (Boldero et al., 2009). Also, having one's partner avoid during a conflict-inducing conversation is associated with rumination about the conversation the following week (Afifi et al., 2012). Compared to non-distressed husbands, distressed husbands (per marital adjustment scale) report feeling more upset when their standards are unmet (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Moreover, according to research on unrealistic standards (i.e., those that are so high that partners could not reach them), individuals who expect a lot of openness from their partner may be more likely to feel stressed, disillusioned, or disappointed if their openness standard is unfulfilled (Larson, 1992).

Research concerning social exchange theories (e.g., interdependence theory, equity theory) also informs the current study because both social exchange and standards involve expectations for what individuals feel they should receive in relationships. Interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and standards both concern comparisons of "what is" versus "what ought to be" in relationships, and this ratio is central to individuals' evaluations of their relationships. According to interdependence theory, when individuals feel their relational outcomes are more costly than they should be, they become distressed and feel more negatively toward their partners and relationships (see, e.g., Lawler, 2001; Lawler & Thye, 1999).

Conversely, other interdependence research has found that when individuals' needs are fulfilled, they feel more positively about their partners and relationships (Le & Agnew, 2001).

Another social exchange perspective, equity theory (e.g., Walster, Walster, & Bershcheid, 1978), suggests that individuals may feel it is unfair when their partner violates their standard for openness, particularly if endorsing the standard reflects the openness individuals believe they "give" to their partner. In other words, individuals want to receive as much openness as they give; they expect equity in disclosures (see, e.g., Chelune, Rosenfield, & Waring, 1985). Thus, when partners are not as open as expected, individuals may feel underbenefitted. According to equity theory, individuals who feel underbenefitted are more distressed and feel more resentful toward their partners than those who are equitably rewarded and overrewarded (Hegtvedt, 1990). Other emotions related to inequity include anger, hurt, and resentment for men, and sadness, frustration, and anger for women (Sprecher, 1986; Sprecher, 2001). In sum, research on social exchange in relationships suggests individuals will feel more negatively toward their partners and relationships when their standard for openness is unmet, and more positively toward their partners and relationships when their standard for openness is met or exceeded.

Despite evidence suggesting that violations of the openness standard in romantic relationships are stressful, the experience of stress has been missing from previous literature. This is a major limitation considering the function of coping is to manage stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). That is, if individuals report coping with unmet standards, as the literature says they do, it is because the experience was appraised as stressful to some extent. More importantly, understanding the experience of stress may provide a theoretical explanation for why individuals respond in the ways they do to violations of openness. Some individuals may not cope because they do not perceive a partner's lack of self-disclosure to be stressful. However, some individuals may do a great deal of coping in response to the stress they appraise to the situation. It is reasonable to expect that violations of the openness standard are seen as incongruent with individuals' goals for their relationships—namely, that partners should freely and comfortably

talk about thoughts and feelings. In theory, individuals should feel more stressed when there is a greater discrepancy between the openness they expect from their partner and the openness their partner exhibits. Thus:

H2: A greater discrepancy between individuals' standard for openness and the degree to which their partner fulfills that standard is positively associated with stress.

COPING

When individuals' standard for openness is unmet and they experience stress, they could experience a variety of negative consequences for themselves and their relationships. However, the theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) states that individuals will engage in coping to manage their stress, and that these efforts could buffer against the negative consequences of having an unmet openness standard. Coping refers to "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Coping is different from reacting or responding because each stems from fundamentally different processes. Unlike simply reacting, which is a largely unconscious and physiological experience, the process of coping takes into account how individuals assign meaning to arousal as they make judgments about the stressor, its relevance to them, and the extent to which they feel they have the efficacy to cope with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Research on unmet standards has found that individuals engage in various coping strategies (Alexander, 2004, 2008; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002) to deal with any dissatisfaction, anger, and disappointment they feel toward their partners and relationships when their standards go unfulfilled (Boldero et al., 2009). Alexander and her colleagues identified 26 different coping strategies that individuals use to deal with unfulfilled standards in their romantic relationships (Alexander, 2004, 2008; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). They include agreement (i.e., working with the partner to resolve the problem), confrontation, reprimand (i.e., yelling or punishing partner for failing to meet standards), cold shoulder (i.e., giving partner the silent

treatment), discussion, argument (i.e., aggressively arguing or fighting), humor (i.e., using humorous statements to express displeasure), reciprocation (i.e., attempting to violate the same standards to get back at one's partner), ignore (i.e., denying the issue), guilt induction (i.e. attempting to make the partner feel guilty about the issue), revitalization (i.e., increasing efforts in hope the partner will reciprocate), model (i.e., setting an example of the behaviors desired from the partner), diversion (i.e., trying to avoid thinking about the problem with other activities), warning (i.e., threatening dire relationship consequences if standards continue to go unfulfilled), postponement (i.e., postponing action in hopes that things will get better), comparison (i.e., using fulfilled standards as replacements for those that are violated), perspective-taking (i.e., trying to understand the other person as being different from others), context (i.e., attributing the situation to situational factors instead of the partner), acceptance (i.e., deciding that this is something "to get used to"), rationalization (i.e., rationalizing the partner's behavior), positive outlook (i.e., believing the partner will change), self-referent (i.e., deciding it was wrong to hold the standard in the first place), third party (i.e., seeking out the help of a third party for advice, counseling, or other aid), self-blame (i.e., believing one brought the issue on him/herself), emotional expression (i.e., displaying negative emotions to partner), and exit (i.e., terminating the relationship). A 10-factor solution of these strategies includes: punishing, clarifying, reframing, self-disparaging, modeling, exiting, seeking social support, escaping, distancing, and using humor.

While research has identified the various strategies individuals use to cope with unfulfilled standards, it is unclear which strategies individuals employ to deal with violations of the openness standard specifically. This is because studies often create a composite measure of the degree to which all relational standards are fulfilled (e.g., Alexander 2004, 2008; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997) and correlate this discrepancy with the self-reported use of certain coping strategies (Alexander 2004, 2008). Using this technique, research has found that individuals tend to employ seeking support, humor, and clarifying coping strategies most often; however, these coping efforts are in response to unmet standards generally, and not an unmet openness standard

specifically. As a notable exception, Afifi et al. (2012) did find that some individuals ruminate when partners violate the standard for openness. Though ruminating suggests individuals are doing a great deal of cognitive work, it does not identify the content or focus (e.g., self vs. other) of individuals' thoughts (Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). Put another way, ruminating potentially encompasses many coping strategies. As individuals obsessively think about or mull over their partner's avoidance, they may use such strategies as self-blame, self-referent, or rationalization. Because there is conceptual overlap between rumination and some strategies for coping with unmet standards, further research is needed to identify the specific coping strategies individuals use to cope with violations of the openness standard.

It is also plausible that individuals do not ruminate at all, but instead attempt to model the openness they want from their partner, hoping for reciprocation (e.g., Derlega, Harris, & Chaikin, 1973). Individuals may also engage in a variety of self-focused coping strategies such as postponement or ignoring, particularly if they feel their partner may respond aggressively (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), or if a discussion of openness is associated with larger relational issues, such as the status of the relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Analogous to the fever model of disclosure (Stiles, 1987), some individuals may be driven by stress to confront their partner about his or her lack of openness. In doing so, they may engage in a variety of strategies, such as agreement, argument, or guilt induction, in order to relieve their stress and restore the relationship. Ultimately, because the specific strategies individuals use to cope with an unmet openness standard remain unknown, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: Which strategies do individuals use to cope with the stress associated with an unmet openness standard?

Understanding which strategies individuals use to cope specifically with violations of the openness standard is important because research suggests that some strategies may be more effective than others in buffering against the negative outcomes associated with an unmet openness standard. For example, Afifi et al. (2012) found that some individuals who ruminated over their partner's avoidance (i.e., their partner violated the openness standard) were less

satisfied with their relationships one week later. Moreover, self-blame as a coping strategy may be particularly detrimental to individuals because it can make them feel bad about themselves, whereas rationalization does not necessarily attribute blame to any one partner.

Approaching a partner about his or her lack of openness may be an effective means of coping to the extent it fosters a "we" approach to the issue (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). For example, perceptions of dyadic coping partially mediate the relationship between standards and marital satisfaction (Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008). Specifically, having relationship-focused standards is positively associated with marital satisfaction, partly because of the positive relationship these standards share with dyadic coping. In turn, dyadic coping is positively associated with marital satisfaction. Wunderer and Schneewind's (2008) research suggests that the use of strategies such as agreement and discussion may be positively associated with relational quality in the current study, particularly if they contribute to a relational climate that promotes more tenderness, more togetherness, and less quarreling (Bodenmann, Pihet, & Kayser, 2006). On the other hand, it may be the case that individuals approaching a partner in more destructive ways, such as through reprimanding or punishing, are likely to be met with defensiveness and verbal aggression (Bodenmann, Meuwly, Bradbury, Gmelch, & Ledermann, 2010). Negativity may escalate during the interaction (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998) and "sustain confrontation," thereby exacerbating stress by encouraging individuals to dwell on the issue while depleting their coping resources too quickly (Lyons et al., 1998, p. 594). As a result, individuals may leave these episodes feeling less satisfied with their relationships.

In sum, research suggests the way in which individuals cope has implications for individuals and their relationships. When their partner fails to disclose thoughts and feelings as much as individuals expect them to, individuals should not only experience stress and negative emotions, but also proceed to cope with that stress. As such, stress should mediate the relationship between violations of openness and coping; greater stress should prompt greater coping. Thus:

H3: Stress mediates the relationship between discrepancies in the fulfillment of an openness standard and the extent to which individuals cope, such that greater stress as a result of an unmet openness standard is positively associated with coping.

As aforementioned, how individuals cope with the stress caused by an unmet openness standard likely influences their relationship satisfaction, as well as their mental well-being. However, existing research does not provide much insight into which coping strategies are most effective at buffering against the negative impact of stress on these outcomes. As a goal of this research is to not only identify the coping strategies individuals use, but also assess which of these strategies are more effective at managing stress, the following research question is posed:

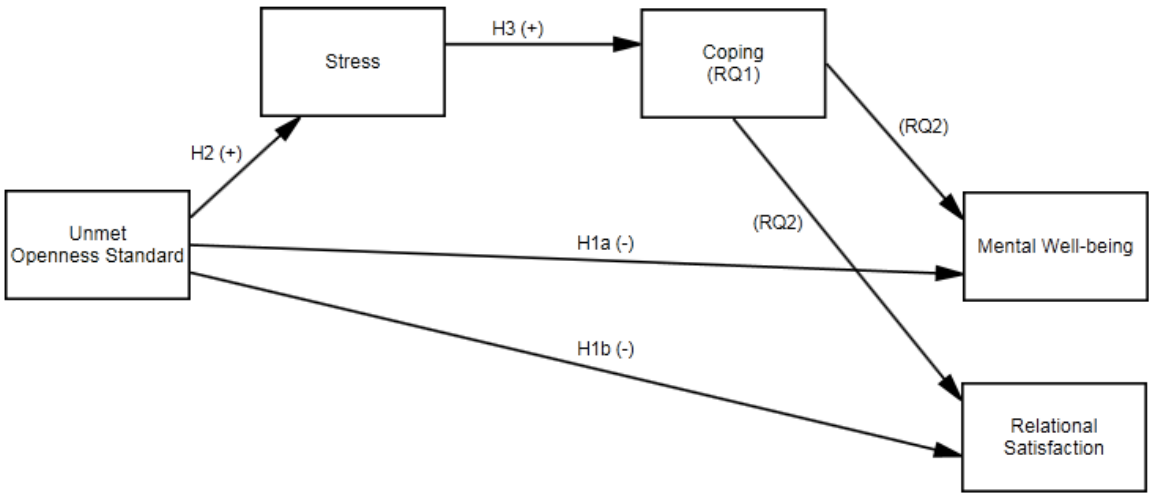
RQ2: Which coping strategies at least partially mediate the relationship between stress and outcomes such that:

a) relational satisfaction changes?

b) individuals' mental well-being changes?

Hypotheses 1-3 and Research Questions 1 and 2 are integrated into one model predicting the relationships between an unmet openness standard, stress, coping strategies, and individual and relational outcomes in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Hypothesized Model



A Longitudinal Approach to Stress and Coping with an Unmet Openness Standard

Viewing coping as a complex process that changes over time is essential to understanding the stress individuals experience as a result of an unmet openness standard and how they cope with it (Lazarus, 1999). Currently, because the research on standards is largely cross-sectional in nature, it is not clear whether and to what extent coping truly has an impact on satisfaction by mediating the relationship between stress and emotions due to violations of the openness standard and individual and relational outcomes. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping is a constantly changing process. The relationship between emotions and coping is bidirectional; emotions affect, and are affected by, coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Likewise, the coping strategies individuals use may change over time as function of the stress individuals appraise to a situation. This complexity and fluidity of cognitions, emotions, and coping is a reason Lazarus (1999) stressed the importance of studying the coping process over time. In support of this notion, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) stress that it is important to measure both proximal and distal outcomes in order to understand how coping works differently in both the short and long term.

Further, by assessing the influence of stress and coping on relational and individual outcomes at different times, the likelihood that the outcomes are confounded with stress and coping is decreased (Lazarus, 1999). Measures of stress and relevant outcomes in this study are conceptually similar; feelings of happiness (as a measure of stress) toward a partner may be highly related to ratings of relational satisfaction, just as feelings of disappointment may be highly correlated with depressive symptoms. Moreover, if stress, coping, and outcomes are measured at the same time, conclusions cannot be drawn as to the causal relationships between the variables, and this undermines the purpose of understanding the process of stress and coping with violations of the openness standard. Hence, in order to draw conclusions about the influence of stress and coping, and to decrease the likelihood of confounding variables, it is necessary to assess stress and coping longitudinally.

Existing empirical research also supports the need for studies more longitudinal in nature. For example, Afifi et al. (2012) found the relationship between openness and satisfaction is nonrecursive, such that those who were less satisfied before a conversation began engaged in more avoidance during the conversation. These findings are significant because studies linking the standard for openness and topic avoidance to satisfaction have largely been cross-sectional in design and assumed that a lack of openness preceded dissatisfaction (e.g., Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Dailey & Palomares, 2004). As the findings suggest, it may also be the case that poor outcomes make for more stress and worse outcomes the following week. In line with previous research on the influence of relational satisfaction on attributions in relationships (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), individuals experiencing dissatisfaction and poorer mental well-being may perceive their partner as less open the following week. Thus:

H4: The association between discrepancies in the fulfillment of an openness standard and individual and relational outcomes is nonrecursive such that:

a) relational satisfaction in one week negatively predicts discrepancies in an unmet openness standard the following week.

b) individual mental well-being in one week negatively predicts discrepancies in an unmet openness standard the following week.

Further, it is plausible that an inability to alleviate stress through coping not only predicts poorer relational and individual outcomes the same week, but also leaves an individual with little resources (e.g., satisfaction; Alexander, 2004) to continue coping the following week. Feeling exhausted and angry about their partner's lack of openness, individuals may begin the following week with higher stress levels. Indeed, some research suggests prolonged coping can lead to fatigue and can even become counter-productive (see Cohen, Evans, Stokols, & Krantz, 1986, for a review; Selye, 1993; Stanton et al., 2000). Or, some dissatisfied individuals may engage in antagonistic cooperating, or coping out of obligation, that results in tension rather than perceptions of care and support (Coyne & Smith, 1991). Moreover, in a study of long distance dating relationships, Maguire and Kinney (2010) found that, compared to those in less distressed

relationships, participants in highly distressed relationships appraise stressors as more threatening and report withdrawal as a more helpful coping strategy. Thus, stress may be a particularly troubling experience for couples already dissatisfied with their relationships. Together, these studies suggest that poor individual and relational outcomes in one week not only signal an inability to effectively manage stress that same week, but also influence an individual's level of stress the following week. Put simply, poorer outcomes may be associated with higher stress, regardless of a change in perceptions of openness. Thus:

H5: The association between stress as a result an unfulfilled openness standard and individual and relational outcomes is nonrecursive such that:

a) *relationship satisfaction negatively predicts stress the following week.*
b) *individual mental well-being negatively predicts stress the following week.*

Chapter 3: Methods

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 203 undergraduate students[1] (37 males and 166 females) recruited from communication courses at a large Southwestern university. On average, participants were 20.17 years of age (*SD* = 2.61). Participants were largely White/Caucasian (65%), followed by Hispanic/Latino(a) (15%), African American/Black (6%), Asian/Pacific Islander (16%), and other (5%). Ethnicity percentages sum to greater than 100% because participants could choose more than one ethnicity category. Students were offered extra credit for their participation, as well as entries into a drawing for one of four $25 VISA gift cards and one of five $10 Starbucks gift cards. Participants were entered into the drawing once for each weekly survey they completed.

In order to participate, individuals needed to currently be in a dating relationship of no more than six months at the time of the initial questionnaire. Recruitment materials specified this requirement to participate. College-aged students in newly dating relationships were selected for two reasons. First, research has found that those under 21 years of age are more likely to hold unrealistic beliefs about relationships and partners, such as myths of "The One and Only," "Perfection," and "Love is Enough" (Priest, Burnett, Thompson, Vogel, & Schvaneveldt, 2009, p. 53). Second, individuals are less likely to hold unrealistic beliefs (e.g., extreme) concerning relationships and partners the more relationship experience they have (e.g., breakups; Priest et al., 2009). Considering college students are likely to have less dating experience than older adults, and they are more likely to hold higher standards for openness, it was reasoned that they would exhibit greater variation in the degree to which they endorsed openness.

[1]It should be noted that sample sizes for each Wave (week) of the study decreased as the study progressed: Wave 1, n = 203, Wave 2, n = 161, Wave 3, n = 141, Wave 4, n = 139; Wave 5, n = 126; and Wave 6, n = 118. Attrition is partly due to the fact that some individuals ended their relationship during a given week and were not asked to return to the study because they could no longer report on their relationship. Specifically, over the course of the study, 45 individuals reported their relationship ended (seven after Wave 1, 10 after Wave 2, 11 after Wave 3, nine after Wave 4, and eight after Wave 5).

Dating relationships (six months or less in length) were the focus of this project because individuals in newly-dating relationships may experience more uncertainty about their partner and the relationship because they are still forming norms for self-disclosure. Despite research suggesting that patterns of openness vary in relationships as a function of individuals' need to be both open and closed about their thoughts and feelings (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 2002), there is "a generally linear association between self-disclosure and the development of a relationship" (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Individuals' inexperience with romantic relationships, in addition to their uncertainty about their current romantic partner, creates a context in which openness becomes a salient and consequential feature of these young adults' romantic relationships. Hence, a sample of college-aged individuals in newly-dating relationships was believed to provide optimal insight into the experience of stress and coping with an unmet openness standard.

On average, participants' relationships were 3.61 months in length (SD = 1.78) and were most frequently described as seriously dating (35%), followed by dating (35%), and casually dating (29%). Most participants reported being geographically close (73%) to their partner, though 27% reported being in a long distance relationship. Fourteen (7%) individuals reported cohabiting with their partner, while 93% said they did not live with their partner.

PROCEDURES

This study employed weekly online questionnaires over the course of six weeks. This period of time and the frequency of data collection were chosen for two reasons. First, research concerning communication in dating relationships has demonstrated six weeks to be a satisfactory length of time to capture fluctuations in goal-relevant partner behavior (here, the fulfillment of an openness standard; e.g, Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Second, the decision to survey participants weekly, as compared to daily or even bi-weekly, was based on the desire to not make responding too demanding for participants. Thus, six weekly questionnaires were

considered a feasible choice for collecting participant responses, as well as an effective way of capturing the experience of stress and coping with an unmet openness standard.

Students who met the eligibility criteria were directed to an initial online questionnaire, where they were informed of the study's purpose and length (six weeks). The beginning of the online questionnaire assured participants that all responses would be kept confidential and that they were free to discontinue participation at any time. To encourage participation and decrease mortality, participants were entered into a drawing for gift cards in addition to receiving extra credit. Those individuals who consented to participate then proceeded to the initial questionnaire, which first asked for background information about the participants and their relationships. Next, participants were asked to complete a series of measures intended to capture the fulfillment (or not) of the openness standard, as well as the stress experienced, the coping strategies used, and the relational and individual outcomes experienced during the previous week. Each measure is elaborated in the next section. In addition to the measures mentioned above, each weekly questionnaire asked participants to report on the status of the relationship (e.g., casually, seriously, or no longer dating).

At the end of the initial questionnaire, participants were asked to create a unique identification (ID) they could use each time they logged in to complete subsequent questionnaires. This ID was attached to their responses for the initial and all weekly questionnaires in order to organize the data. At the very end of the initial questionnaire, participants were re-directed to a separate questionnaire—to protect participant confidentiality—that asked for their email address so that reminders and links to weekly questionnaires could be sent.

MEASURES

Openness Standard Fulfillment

To assess the discrepancy between the openness participants expected from their partners and the openness their partners exhibited in the previous week, a discrepancy score was

calculated by subtracting the fulfillment of the standard from the endorsement of the standard. Specifically, one item asked participants to rate, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much so*), the degree to which they endorse the following statement: "Your partner should be willing to talk openly about his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions" (Alexander, 2004, 2008). The same item was used to assess fulfillment of the openness standard, except the phrase, "Your partner should be" was replaced with, "Over the course of the last week, my partner was." For ease of interpretation, higher positive scores indicate the degree to which the standard was violated. Means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Stress

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) classification of emotions and associated core relational themes was used to measure stress. Two subscales measured negative and positive emotions, though only the negative emotions subscale was used for the current study. For each item, participants were asked, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Does not describe my reaction at all*, 7 = *Describes my reaction completely*), to "Think about your partner's communication in the past week and rate the extent to which the following emotions reflect how you felt about it." The nine emotions include, *anger*, *anxiety*, *fright*, *guilt*, *shame*, *sadness*, *envy*, *jealousy*, and *disgust*. Alpha reliabilities, and means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Coping Strategies

A modified version of Alexander's (2004, 2008) list of strategies for coping with unfulfilled standards was used. The original list consists of 56 items representing 10 coping strategies (*punishing, clarifying, reframing, self-disparaging, modeling, exiting, seeking social support, escaping, distancing,* and *using humor*). In order to decrease participant fatigue in responding to the weekly questionnaires, redundant items were removed, resulting in a final measure of 38 items for the 10 strategies. A complete list of the items can be found in Appendix F. For each item, participants were asked, on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Does not describe my reaction at all*, 7 = *Describes my reaction completely*), the degree to which the item described

their reaction when their partner failed to meet their openness standard over the course of the previous week. If partners met or exceeded participants' openness standard, participants selected the lowest point, 1 = *Does not describe my reaction at all*, for the coping items. Scores for each coping strategy were computed as the mean of the items that assessed that strategy according to Alexander's (2004; 2008) original factor structure. Alpha reliabilities, and means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Mental Well-being

For the cross-sectional analyses of Week 1 data, mental well-being was represented as a latent variable comprised of common measures used to operationalize "mental well-being" in the literature. Specifically, and following other research concerning the mental well-being outcomes associated with communication in relationships (e.g., Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2007), this study included measures of depression symptoms and life satisfaction.

First, Radloff's (1977) Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to assess individuals' depressive symptoms. The scale consists of twenty 4-point Likert-type scale items (0 = *Rarely*, 1 = *Some or little*, 2 = *Occasionally*, 3 = *Most or all of the time*). Items include: "I talked less than usual," "I could not get 'going'," "I felt that people disliked me," and "I felt that everything I did was effort." Total severity of depressive symptoms was calculated by reversing scores for four positively-worded items and then summing across all scale items. Scores ranged from 22 to 72, with higher scores indicating more severe depressive symptoms. Alpha reliability, and means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Second, the Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale assessed global life satisfaction. It is composed of five 7-point Likert-type scale items (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 4 = *Neither agree nor disagree*, and 7 = *Strongly agree*) that asked participants to indicate their agreement with the following items: "The conditions of my life are excellent," "I am satisfied with my life," "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing," "The conditions of my life are excellent," and "In most ways my life is close to my

ideal." Individuals' life satisfaction scores are the average of these five items. Higher scores on this measure indicate higher satisfaction with life. Alpha reliability, and means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Relationship Satisfaction

An adapted version of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire was used to assess relational satisfaction. Because the measure was originally used to assess spouses' marital satisfaction, the phrase "marital life" was replaced with "relational life." The measure includes ten 7-point semantic differential items (e.g., "worthwhile—useless" and "lonely—friendly") and one global satisfaction item ("completely satisfied—completely dissatisfied"). In order to compute individuals' relationship satisfaction scores, the average of the first ten items was added to the score of the global item, and this sum was then divided by two. Alpha reliability, and means and standard deviations across waves can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Variable Means and Standard Deviations across Waves

	Wave 1 (n = 203)		Wave 2 (n = 161)	Wave 3 (n = 141)	Wave 4 (n = 139)	Wave 5 (n = 126)	Wave 6 (n = 118)
Variable	*M* (*SD*)	α	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
1. Discrepancy	.76 (1.50)	--	.71 (1.55)	.72 (1.60)	.63 (1.52)	.94 (1.64)	.64 (1.53)
2. Negative Emotion	2.88 (1.12)	.84	2.61 (1.12)	2.34 (1.08)	2.47 (1.08)	2.50 (1.23)	2.36 (1.17)
3. Punishing	2.24 (1.11)	.80	2.14 (1.11)	2.16 (1.25)	2.18 (1.19)	2.15 (1.17)	2.11 (1.17)
4. Clarifying	4.38 (1.50)	.86	4.33 (1.63)	4.29 (1.56)	4.40 (1.43)	4.18 (1.70)	4.20 (1.60)
5. Reframing	4.04 (1.08)	.68	3.84 (1.27)	3.69 (1.34)	3.78 (1.32)	3.52 (1.30)	3.26 (1.39)
6. Self-disparaging	2.81 (1.32)	.81	2.56 (1.32)	2.48 (1.32)	2.52 (1.34)	2.50 (1.36)	2.31 (1.39)
7. Modeling	3.56 (1.26)	.69	3.46 (1.41)	3.37 (1.49)	3.49 (1.45)	3.16 (1.28)	3.06 (1.40)
8. Exiting	1.65 (1.20)	.83	1.70 (1.29)	1.78 (1.39)	1.70 (1.37)	1.63 (1.29)	1.61 (1.38)
9. Seeking Social Support	3.98 (2.05)	.90	3.68 (2.04)	3.81 (2.02)	3.77 (1.94)	3.43 (1.93)	3.61 (2.09)
10. Escaping	2.85 (1.33)	.56	2.77 (1.27)	2.64 (1.37)	2.60 (1.40)	2.61 (1.44)	2.26 (1.33)
11. Distancing	3.16 (1.62)	.74	2.92 (1.61)	2.69 (1.62)	2.77 (1.69)	2.94 (1.73)	2.58 (1.63)
12. Using Humor	3.64 (1.78)	.81	3.36 (1.83)	3.07 (1.67)	3.25 (1.87)	3.03 (1.68)	3.03 (1.83)
13. Relationship Satisfaction	5.38 (1.19)	.94	5.37 (1.29)	5.37 (1.41)	5.40 (1.32)	5.27 (1.49)	5.67 (1.27)
14. Depression	31.71 (8.01)	.86	31.45 (9.12)	31.84 (9.57)	31.14 (10.24)	32.22 (10.44)	31.09 (10.09)
15. Satisfaction with Life	5.35 (1.15)	.89	5.50 (1.10)	5.51 (1.27)	5.62 (1.15)	5.56 (1.27)	5.68 (1.33)
16. Mental Well-being	.05 (.89)	--	.05 (.90)	.09 (.90)	.05 (.90)	.01 (.92)	.06 (.89)

Note: Alpha reliability for the Satisfaction with Life Scale improved from .86 to .89 after dropping one item, "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Depression (reverse-coded) and Satisfaction with Life were converted to Z-scores before being entered into the structural models for the cross-sectional analyses. Mental Well-being was computed as the mean of the Depression (reverse-coded) and Satisfaction with Life Z-scores. As a composite score, Mental Well-being was only used for the longitudinal analyses.

Chapter 4: Results

CROSS-SECTIONAL ANALYSES

Preliminary Analyses

The first preliminary data analysis examined the bivariate correlations among the variables in this study (e.g., openness standard fulfillment, stress, negative emotions, positive emotions, coping strategies, relationship satisfaction, and mental well-being) at Week 1, the time of the initial questionnaire. A table of correlations among the variables is provided in Table 2.

Second, independent samples t-tests of mean differences between males and females for the variables under investigation was conducted in order to determine if sex should be entered as a control variable in subsequent analyses. Previous research has found that females report having their relational standards met less often than males (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). However, in this study, males and females did not significantly differ in discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards, or in reports of stress, coping strategies, relationship satisfaction, depression, and satisfaction with life. Thus, sex was not entered as a control variable.

Table 2: Correlations among the Variables at Wave 1 (n = 203)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Discrepancy	1.00														
2. Negative Emotion	.12	1.00													
3. Punishing	.02	.48***	1.00												
4. Clarifying	-.15*	.01	.14*	1.00											
5. Reframing	-.13	.23**	.06	.33***	1.00										
6. Self-disparaging	.06	.48***	.38***	.03	.55***	1.00									
7. Modeling	-.07	.42***	.24***	.23**	.61***	.53***	1.00								
8. Exiting	.14†	.28***	.42***	-.14*	-.04	.34***	.10	1.00							
9. Seeking Social Support	.05	.11	.14†	.33***	.23**	.17*	.27***	.15*	1.00						
10. Escaping	.20**	.41***	.30***	-.16*	.32***	.53***	.41***	.33***	.21**	1.00					
11. Distancing	.03	.38***	.45***	-.04	.10	.34***	.25***	.20**	.08	.35***	1.00				
12. Using Humor	-.01	.30***	.35***	.08	.20**	.20**	.21**	.02	.11	.22**	.27***	1.00			
13. Relationship Satisfaction	-.39***	-.29***	-.25***	.26***	.00	-.31***	-.03	-.36***	-.21**	-.40***	-.21**	.05	1.00		
14. Depression	.16*	.44***	.32***	-.21**	.03	.36***	.16*	.36***	.19	.38***	.26**	.05	-.40***	1.00	
15. Satisfaction with Life	-.17*	-.24***	-.23**	.20**	.14*	-.18**	.00	-.18*	-.08	-.24**	-.15*	.03	.40***	-.56***	1.00

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p<.001, †p < .10

Main Analyses

Structural equation modeling was used to assess H1-H3 and RQ1 and RQ2. Structural equation modeling is the preferred statistical analysis when there are latent variables in a model, as it can estimate the means of latent variables and estimate group mean differences (e.g., differences between those who are casually or seriously dating, or between males or females) on those latent variables (Kline, 2010). In the current study's model, mental well-being was represented as a latent variable composed of measures of depression and satisfaction with life. Further, SEM has advantages over traditional ANOVA and multiple regression analyses because it can evaluate an entire model for its goodness-of-fit with the data (Kline, 2010). Because a goal of this study was to assess the mediating effects of both stress and coping on the relationship between an unmet openness standard and relational and individual outcomes, it was important to assess the degree to which the hypothesized model as a whole explains individuals' experiences.

Hypotheses 1-3 and Research Questions 1 and 2 were integrated into one model predicting the relationships between an unmet openness standard, stress, coping strategies, and individual and relational outcomes. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 predicted that a greater discrepancy in the fulfillment of individuals' standard for openness would negatively predict relational satisfaction and mental well-being. Hypothesis 2 predicted that a greater discrepancy between individuals' standard for openness and the degree to which their partner fulfills that standard would be positively associated with stress. Last, Hypothesis 3 predicted that stress would mediate the relationship between negative discrepancies in the fulfillment of an openness standard and the extent to which individuals cope. Research Questions 1 and 2 were concerned with the strategies individuals use to cope. Specifically, Research Question 1 asked which coping strategies individuals use to cope with the stress associated with an unmet openness standard, and Research Question 2 asked which coping strategies were responsible for increasing relationship satisfaction and individuals' mental well-being by mediating the relationship between stress and these outcomes.

A separate model was created for each of the 10 coping strategies. For each model, only the coping strategy was replaced. A covariance matrix was constructed and used as input to AMOS 19.0 in order to estimate parameters using maximum likelihood procedures. Four fit indices were used to assess the model's fit, and guidelines for fit indices were chosen a priori. Specifically, the model's chi-square should not be significant; the model's comparative fit index (CFI) should exceed .95; and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), as well as the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should not exceed .08. In order to estimate indirect effects, as well as their significance, 95% bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were used with 5000 samples (see Hayes, 2009).

As seen in Table 3, all 10 models showed mixed fit. Upon review of the standardized path coefficients, the independent variable, discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards, was not significantly related to stress for any of the models. Therefore, stress could not serve as a mediator of the relationship between discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and the use of coping strategies. Additionally, for some of the models, the coping strategy was not related to the dependent variables (i.e., for punishing, distancing, and self-disparaging) or stress was not related to the coping strategy (i.e., clarifying and seeking social support). For these models, the coping strategy could not mediate the relationship between negative emotion and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. Further, modification indices suggested several covariates be added to the models to improve fit.[2]

[2]Specifically, modification indices for the hypothesized models suggested that a covariate between the error terms for satisfaction with life and relationships satisfaction, as well as a covariate between discrepancies and the error term for mental well-being, would improve model fit. The first modification index suggests that satisfaction with life and relationship satisfaction share variability based on a factor not measured by either variable. The second modification index suggests discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and mental well-being share variability based on a factor not measured by either variable.

Table 3: Hypothesized and Alternative Model Results by Coping Strategy

	Hypothesized Model					Alternative Model				
Coping Strategy	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*-value	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*-value	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1. Punishing	5.96 (4)	0.20	0.98	0.07	0.06	6.98 (6)	0.32	.99	.04	.06
2. Clarifying	7.80 (4)	0.10	0.97	0.10	0.06	9.43 (6)	0.15	.97	.08	.07
3. Exiting	14.86 (4)	.01	.96	.12	.05	8.37 (6)	0.21	.98	.06	.07
4. Distancing	13.18 (4)	.01	.96	.11	.06	6.36 (6)	0.38	1.00	.03	.06
5. Using Humor	12.84 (4)	.02	.96	.11	.06	6.54 (6)	0.37	1.00	.03	.06
6. Seeking Social Support	12.73 (4)	.01	.96	.11	.06	6.95 (6)	.33	.99	.04	.06
7. Self-disparaging	14.16 (4)	.01	.96	.11	.06	10.13 (6)	.12	.97	.08	.07
8. Modeling	13.68 (4)	.01	.96	.11	.06	8.27 (6)	.22	.98	.06	.07
9. Reframing	15.61 (4)	.00	.95	.12	.05	9.19 (6)	.16	.97	.07	.06
10. Escaping	11.58 (4)	.02	.97	.10	.05	9.19 (6)	.16	.97	.07	.07

Note: For both hypothesized and alternative models, results reported are pre-trimming of insignificant paths. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

In order to improve fit, suggested covariates were included and insignificant paths were removed by way of model trimming (Kline, 2010), beginning with the least significant path. For most models, modification indices and trimming did not improve model fit. However, for each model, discrepancy remained strongly related to satisfaction. This prompted a revisit of the survey questionnaire to determine if how the items were worded may have influenced the relationship discrepancy shares with the other variables in the model. In the questionnaire, individuals were asked to rate the extent to which their partner was willing to talk openly about his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions over the course of the previous week. In contrast, questions concerning experiences of negative emotion (stress) and the use of coping strategies asked how individuals felt and responded when their partner violated their openness standard. Thus, discrepancy may have served as a more global measure, while measures of negative emotions and coping strategies were more specific measures of how individuals responded to violations of openness when they did occur (even when standards were fulfilled or exceeded). Because discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards had such a strong negative effect on satisfaction, discrepancy was retained as a control variable relating to relationship satisfaction and alternative models were created for each of the 10 coping strategies.

In addition to reviewing the survey items, a t-test of mean differences was conducted to compare scores on the model variables (stress, all ten coping strategies, relationship satisfaction, and depression and satisfaction with life) between individuals whose standard for openness was unmet (discrepancy value greater than 0) and individuals whose standard for openness was met (discrepancy value less than 0). It was believed that those individuals whose openness standard was met may not have reported as much stress as those individuals whose standard for openness was unmet. Because individuals with fulfilled standard for openness felt less stressed, they were less likely to report coping, if they reported coping at all. In sum, inclusion of individuals whose standard for openness was met may have reduced the strength of the relationships in the model.

Indeed, results from an independent samples t-test indicated that those individuals whose standard for openness was unmet differed significantly for several variables from those

individuals whose standard was met. Specifically, individuals whose standard for openness was unmet (M = 3.13, SD = 1.10, N = 100) reported more stress than individuals whose standard for openness was met (M = 2.66, SD = 1.09, N = 103), $t(200) = 3.04$, $p < .01$. They (M = 5.08, SD = 1.19, N = 100) also reported less relationship satisfaction than individuals whose standard for openness was met (M = 5.65, SD = 1.12, N = 103), $t(200) = -3.51$, $p < .01$. Individuals whose standard for openness was unmet (M = 3.10, SD = 1.33, N = 100) reported using distracting as a coping strategy more than individuals whose standard for openness was met (M = 2.63, SD = 1.29, N = 103), $t(201) = 2.58$, $p < .05$. They (M = 4.16, SD = 1.46, N = 100) also reported using clarifying as a coping strategy less than individuals whose standard for openness was met (M = 4.58, SD = 1.51, N = 103), $t(201) = -2.01$, $p < .05$. Considering the two groups significantly differed on several variables, it was decided that those individuals whose standard was met would be removed from the alternative structural models.[3] Table 4 contains the correlations among the variables for the subset of the sample whose standard was unmet at Wave 1.

As seen in Table 3, all 10 alternative models showed acceptable fit. Results from these models partially confirmed Hypothesis 1; discrepancies between the endorsement and the fulfillment of individuals' openness standards were significantly associated with relationship satisfaction but not significantly related to mental well-being. Hypothesis 2 was not supported; discrepancies in the fulfillment of individuals' openness standards were not significantly related to stress. As a result, Hypothesis 3 was not supported; stress did not significantly mediate the relationship between discrepancies in the fulfillment of individuals' openness standards and the use of coping strategies. While the alternative models failed to support stress as a mediator, the alternative models indicated that several coping strategies were mediators of the relationship between stress and

[3]Only those individuals whose standard for openness was unmet in Week 1 were included in the cross-sectional analyses. However, because the longitudinal analyses were focused on week-to-week changes in the variables, all 203 individuals were included in the longitudinal analyses. Individuals whose standard for openness was met in Week 1 may have had their standard unmet in Week 2. Thus, changes in the variables from Week 2 to Week 3 for these individuals were of critical import to the analyses answering the research questions of this study. It would have been impossible to assess the changes from week to week had these individuals been excluded for the study entirely from the onset.

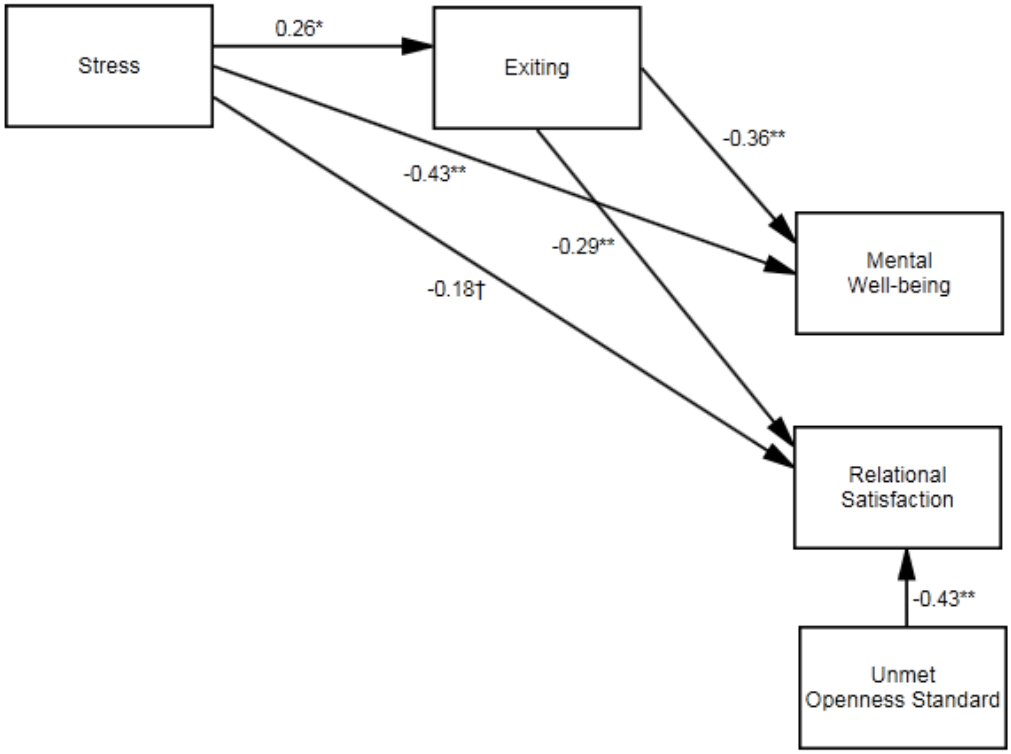
Table 4: Correlations among the Variables at Wave 1 for Individuals with an Unmet Openness Standard (n = 100)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Discrepancy	1.00														
2. Negative Emotion	-.06	1.00													
3. Punishing	.05	.46***	1.00												
4. Clarifying	-.13	.03	.20†	1.00											
5. Reframing	-.13	.29**	.08	.38***	1.00										
6. Self-disparaging	-.02	.47***	.23*	.03	.65***	1.00									
7. Modeling	-.11	.41***	.10	.26**	.62***	.55***	1.00								
8. Exiting	.16	.26**	.25*	-.16	-.03	.31**	.05	1.00							
9. Seeking Social Support	.08	.07	.04	.21*	.32**	.25*	.38***	.23*	1.00						
10. Escaping	.17	.34**	.17†	-.23*	.23*	.47***	.32**	.25*	.31**	1.00					
11. Distancing	-.05	.40***	.39***	-.10	.06	.25*	.15	.16	.05	.24*	1.00				
12. Using Humor	.03	.31**	.33**	-.04	.20*	.21*	.14	.01	-.03	.26**	.35***	1.00			
13. Relationship Satisfaction	-.48***	-.22*	-.18†	.27**	-.01	-.26**	-.00	-.40***	-.25*	-.39***	-.18†	.07	1.00		
14. Depression	.16	.47***	.37***	-.24*	.01	.38***	.08	.47***	.19†	.38***	.26**	.04	-.47***	1.00	
15. Satisfaction with Life	-.18†	-.26**	-.25*	.26**	.19†	-.09	.10	-.25*	-.04	-.20*	-.09	-.05	.38***	-.66***	1.00

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p<.001, †p < .10

relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. In response to stress, model results indicated that individuals are more likely to use punishing, reframing, self-disparaging, modeling, exiting, escaping, distancing, and using humor coping strategies (RQ1). The only two coping strategies not significantly related to stress in the structural models were clarifying and seeking social support (see Table 4 correlations). Results from the alternative structural models suggest that only five coping strategies significantly mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being (RQ2). Specifically, stress was positively related to individuals' use of the exiting coping strategy; in turn, exiting was negatively related to both relationship satisfaction and mental well-being (Figure 2).

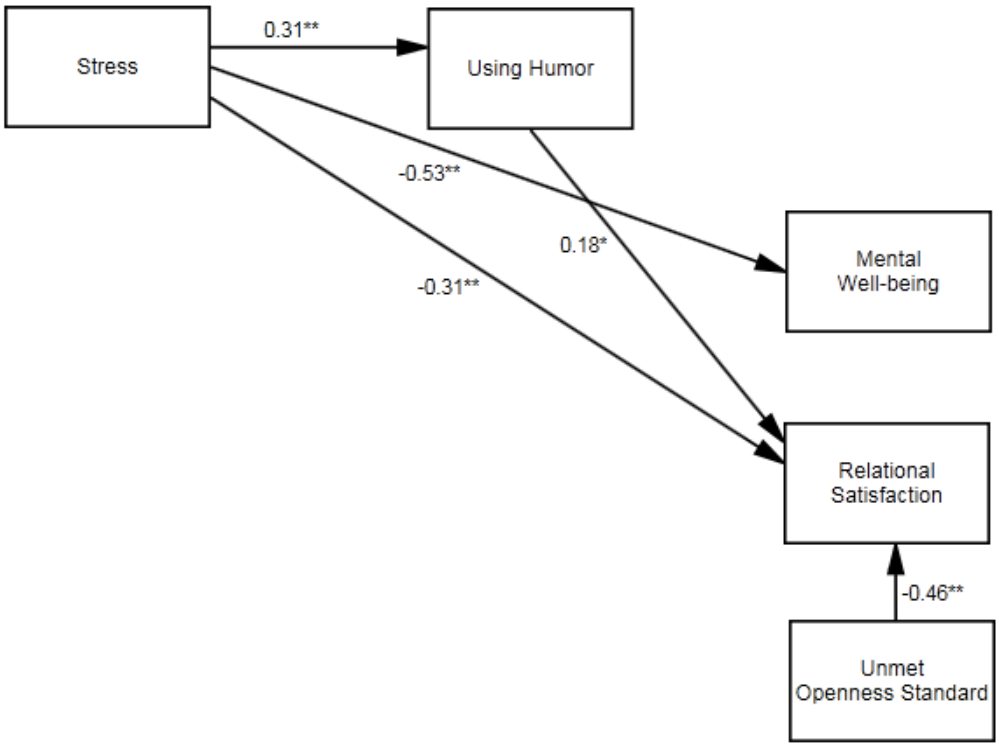
Figure 2: Final Model for Exiting as Coping Strategy with Standardized Path Coefficients



Note: $\chi^2 = 8.37$, $df = 6$, $p = .21$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07.

Stress was also positively related to the using humor coping strategy; in turn, using humor was positively related to relationship satisfaction (Figure 3).

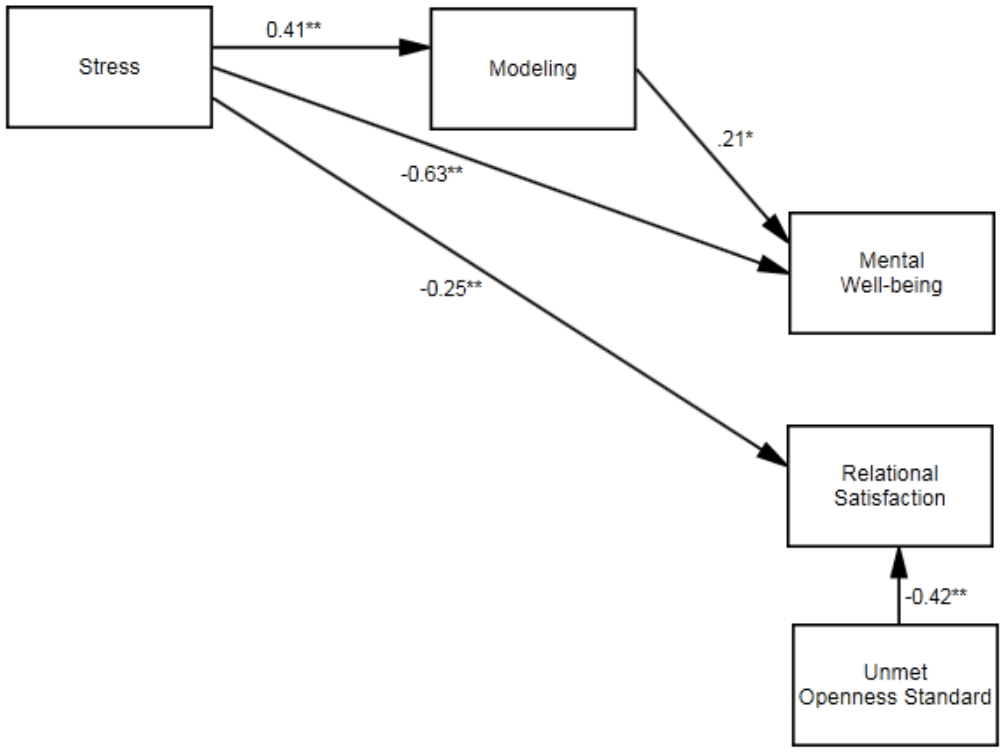
Figure 3: Final Model for Using Humor as Coping Strategy with Standardized Path Coefficients



Note: $\chi^2 = 6.55$, $df = 7$, $p = .48$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .06.

Next, stress was positively related to the modeling coping strategy; in turn, modeling was positively related to mental well-being (Figure 4).

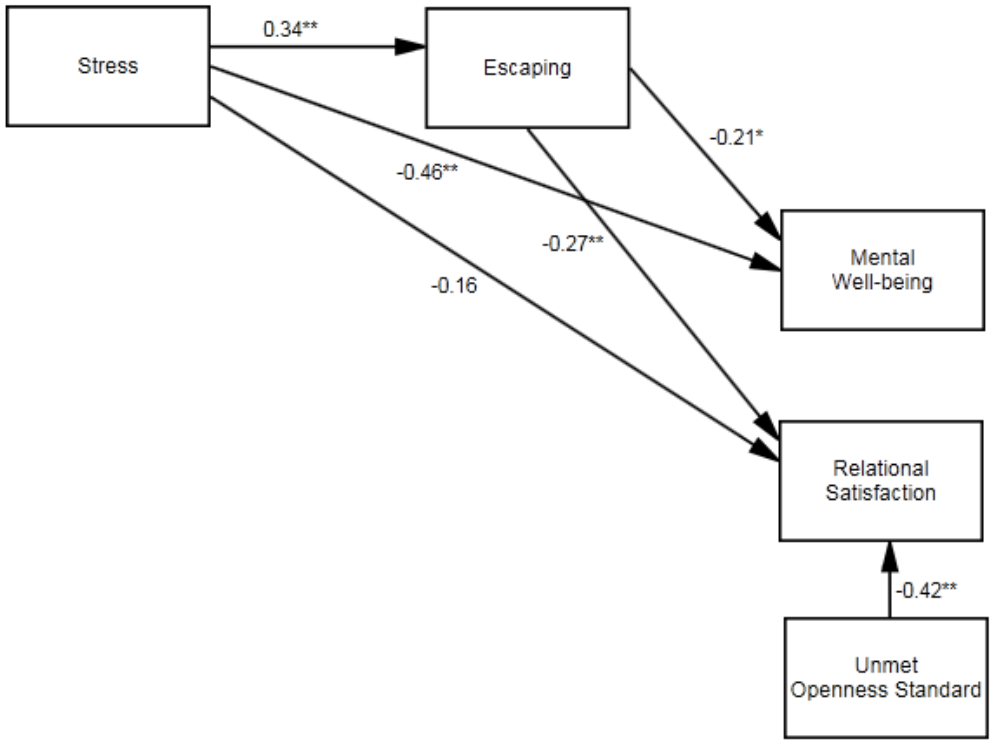
Figure 4: Final Model for Modeling as Coping Strategy with Standardized Path Coefficients



Note: $\chi^2 = 8.73$, $df = 7$, $p = .27$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .07.

Also, stress was positively related to the escaping coping strategy; in turn, escaping was negatively related to both relationship satisfaction and mental well-being (Figure 5).

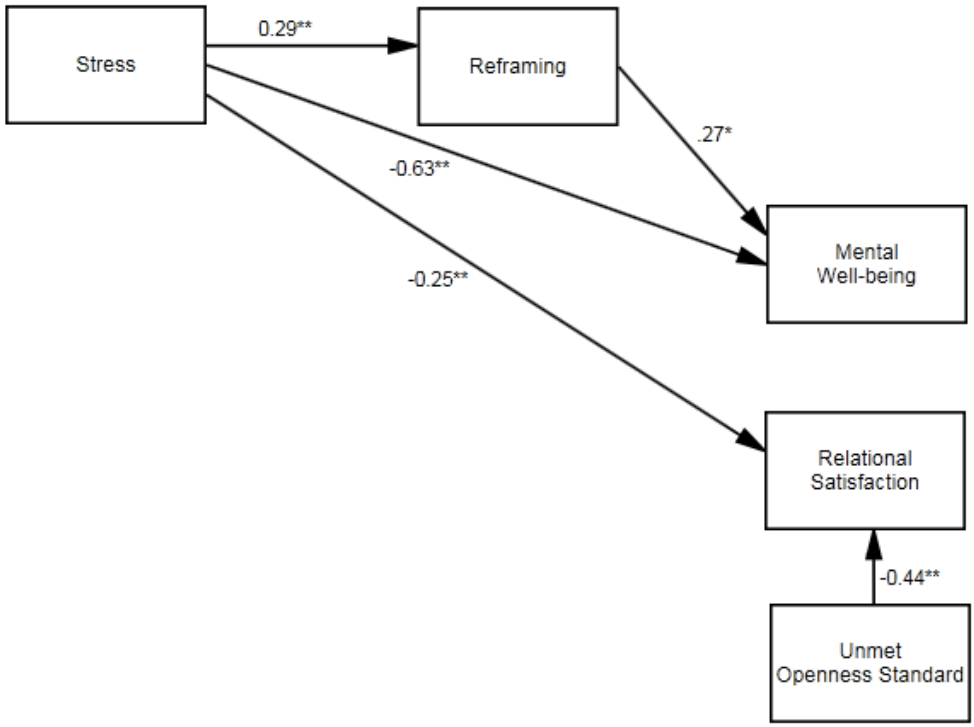
Figure 5: Final Model for Escaping as Coping Strategy with Standardized Path Coefficients



Note: $\chi^2 = 9.19$, $df = 6$, $p = .16$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .07.

Last, stress was positively related to the reframing; in turn, reframing was positively related to mental well-being (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Final Model for Escaping as Coping Strategy with Standardized Path Coefficients



Note: $\chi^2 = 9.55$, $df = 7$, $p = .22$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07.

Table 5 contains the direct, total, and indirect effects of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being for the structural models for which the coping strategy was a significant mediator.

Table 5: Standardized Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects on Satisfaction and Mental Well-being

Model by Coping Strategy	Direct	Indirect	Total
Exiting			
Satisfaction			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.18†	-0.08**	-0.25*
2. Exiting	-0.29**	--	-0.29**
Mental Well-being			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.43**	-0.10**	-0.52**
2. Exiting	-0.36**	--	-0.36**
Using Humor			
Satisfaction			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.31**	-0.06*	-0.26**
2. Using Humor	0.18*	--	0.18*
Modeling			
Mental Well-being			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.63**	0.09**	-0.54**
2. Modeling	0.21*	--	0.21*
Reframing			
Mental Well-being			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.63**	0.08**	-0.55**
2. Reframing	0.27*	--	0.27*
Escaping			
Satisfaction			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.16	-0.09**	-0.25*
2. Escaping	-0.27**	--	-0.27**
Mental Well-being			
1. Negative Emotion	-0.46**	-0.07*	-0.53**
2. Exiting	-0.21*	--	-0.21*

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, $^{\dagger}p = .05$. Each coping strategy represents a different model, and only models for which the coping strategy significantly mediated the relationship for either or both outcome variables are presented in this table. For each model, the discrepancy between individuals' openness standard and the degree to which the standard was met was added as a control variable to relationship satisfaction. Rounding error makes some total effects slightly different than the sum of the direct and indirect effects.

As a summary, stress was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, though the strength of the relationship depended on the model being tested. Stress was positively associated with the use of eight of the ten coping strategies (the exception being the clarifying and seeking social support strategies). Of these eight strategies, five mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, exiting and using humor strategies partially mediated the relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and relational satisfaction. Exiting was negatively related to relationship satisfaction, strengthening the overall negative effect of stress, and using humor was positively related to relationship satisfaction, lessening the overall negative effect of stress. Further, exiting, modeling, escaping, and reframing partially mediated the relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and mental well-being. Exiting and escaping were negatively related to mental well-being, strengthening the overall negative effect of stress. On the other hand, modeling and reframing were positively related to relationship satisfaction, lessening the overall negative effect of stress. Notably, the escaping strategy fully mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction, suggesting that stress decreases satisfaction because individuals distract themselves from their partner's lack of openness.

LONGITUDINAL ANALYSES

Preliminary Analyses

The first preliminary analysis involved computing the intraclass correlation (ICC) for each dependent variable. The ICC measures the proportion of variance explained in the dependent variable that is between groups, or in this study, between individuals (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In order to obtain the intraclass correlation, a hierarchical linear model was built using HLM 7 software. Discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and stress were entered as dependent variables in separate models. As fully unconditional models, no other predictor variables were entered. The models were as follows:

Model 1: Discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week *t*

Level 1 Equation: Discrepancies (Week *t*) = $\pi_{0j} + r_{ij}$

Level 2 Equation: $\pi_{0j} = \beta_{00} + u_{0j}$

Model 1: Stress at Week *t*

Level 1 Equation: Stress (Week *t*) = $\pi_{0j} + r_{ij}$

Level 2 Equation: $\pi_{0j} = \beta_{00} + u_{0j}$

Model results for the two dependent variables can be found in Tables 6 and 7, Model 1. To calculate the intraclass correlation, the variance between groups at Level-2 (τ_{00}) is divided by the variance between groups (τ_{00}) plus the Level-1 variance (σ^2). ICC coefficients closer to one indicate that the variability in a dependent variable is mostly between-person, and coefficients closer to zero indicate that the variability in a dependent variable is mostly within-persons. In other words, the ICC is a measure of clustering of the data, and as such, ICC coefficients are often used as a condition to proceed with hierarchical linear modeling. For the dependent variable, discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week *t*, $\rho = .39$. That is, 39% of the variance in discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week *t* was between individuals. For the dependent variable, stress at Week *t*, $\rho = .66$. That is, 66% of the variance in stress at Week *t* was between individuals. ICC for both dependent variables provided support to proceed with hierarchical linear modeling to address Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Table 6: Hierarchical Linear Models for Variables Predicting Discrepancies between the Endorsement and Fulfillment of Openness Standards at Week *t*

Model	Coefficient	SE	t-ratio	*df*	*p*-value
1. Fully unconditional					
Intercept	.78	.08	9.32	201	<.001
Variance components	**Standard Deviation**	**Variance Component**	***df***	χ^2	***p*-value**
Intercept, τ_{00}	.99	.97	201	736.45	<.001
Level-1, σ^2	1.23	1.51			
2. Random Coefficient Model	**Coefficient**	**SE**	**t-ratio**	***df***	***p*-value**
Intercepts					
Intercept, β_{00}	1.09	.37	2.94	162	<.01
Slopes					
Time, β_{10}	.01	.03	-.26	657	.79
Discrepancy W (*t*-1), β_{20}	.23	.05	6.91	162	<.001
Satisfaction, W (*t*-1), β_{30}	-.10	.07	-1.61	162	.11
Mental Well-being, W (*t*-1), β_{40}	.10	.07	1.39	162	.17
Variance components	**Standard Deviation**	**Variance Component**	***df***	χ^2	***p*-value**
Intercept, τ_{00}	1.78	3.19	93	88.86	>.50
Level-1, σ^2	1.29	1.67			

Table 7: Hierarchical Linear Models for Variables Predicting Stress at Week *t*

	Coefficient	**SE**	**t-ratio**	***df***	***p*-value**
1. Fully unconditional					
Intercept	2.63	.07	36.81	201	<.001
Variance components	**Standard Deviation**	**Variance Component**	***df***	χ^2	***p*-value**
Intercept, τ_{00}	.94	.89	201	1897.54	<.001
Level-1, σ^2	.67	.45			
2. Random Coefficient Model	**Coefficient**	**SE**	**t-ratio**	***df***	***p*-value**
Intercepts					
Intercept, β_{00}	.77	.23	3.37	160	<.01
Initial Relationship Length, β_{01}	-.01	.02	-.43	160	.67
Long Distance Status, β_{02}	.15	.07	2.09	160	.04
Slopes					
Time, β_{10}	.01	.02	.58	653	.57
Stress, W (*t*-1), β_{20}	.58	.04	13.01	653	<.001
Satisfaction, W (*t*-1), $\beta 3_0$	.02	.03	.59	653	.55
Mental Well-being, W (*t*-1), $\beta 4_0$	-.04	.05	-.90	653	.37
Variance components	**Standard Deviation**	**Variance Component**	***df***	χ^2	***p*-value**
Intercept, τ_{00}	.82	.67	101	106.95	.32
Level-1, σ^2	.70	.49			

Note: Initial Relationship Length was measured in months. For the Long Distance Status variable, 1 = Yes, 0 = No.

Next, in order to determine which control variables to include in the models, individual sex (Males = 1, Females = 0), initial relationship length at Week 1 (in months, grand mean-centered), cohabiting status (Yes = 1, 0 = No), and long distance relationship status (Yes = 1, 0 = No) were entered separately at Level-2 into models predicting discrepancies in the fulfillment of an openness standard and stress. As an example, the model testing the influence of initial relationship length at Week 1 (grand-mean centered) on weekly reports of stress was:

Level 1 Equation: Stress Week $t = \pi_{00} + r_{ij}$

Level 2 Equation: $\pi_{0j} = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}$(Relationship Length) + u_{0j}

For the model predicting discrepancies in the fulfillment of an openness standard, none of the proposed control variables was a significant predictor. For the model predicting stress, initial relationship length ($\beta_{01} = .07$, $SE = .04$, $t(200) = 1.72$, $p = .09$) and long distance relationship status ($\beta_{01} = .31$, $SE = .16$, $t(200) = 1.98$, $p = .05$) were marginally significant predictors. Thus, initial relationship length and long distance relationship status were retained at Level-2 for the model predicting stress.

Main Analyses

Multilevel modeling (MLM) was used to assess Hypotheses 4 and 5, which concern the Multilevel modeling (MLM) was used to assess Hypotheses 4 and 5, which concern the nonrecursive relationships between individual and relational outcomes and discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards (*H4*) and stress (*H5*). Over repeated measures analysis of variance (RM-ANOVA), MLM has several advantages (see Kwok et al., 2008; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). First, MLM handles the variable of time as a continuous variable, so it is not necessary that data be collected from participants at the same time (e.g., all at once) and with equal spacing (e.g., every two weeks) as with RM-ANOVA. As such, MLM can accommodate unequal spacing between time intervals and unbalanced data. Second, MLM allows researchers to use participants' data, even if participants did not complete each wave of data collection. In RM-ANOVA, all of a participant's data are removed if they are missing data for a particular time

period. In sum, MLM is a more flexible method to use in longitudinal (repeated measures) designs and makes use of all available data for analyses.

For the models in this study, weekly observations were nested within individuals, and individuals were nested within relationships. Thus, two-level models were constructed with weekly observations at Level-1, and individual and relationship characteristics (e.g., those things that do not change from week to week) at Level-2. HLM 7 statistical software was used to build and test the multilevel models for Hypotheses 4 and 5. Separate models were examined for each dependent variable, and models were assessed using maximum likelihood estimation.

Again, the goals of Hypotheses 4 and 5 were to test the effects of relationship satisfaction and individual mental well-being on subsequent reports of the fulfillment of openness standards and stress. To assess the influence of variables in the present week on variables the following week, the data were reconfigured before the models were constructed. Specifically, the data were reorganized such that participants' reports of the dependent variable for a given Week *t* (e.g., discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and stress) corresponded with participants' reports of the independent variable at Week (*t*-1) (e.g., relationship satisfaction or mental well-being the previous week). In the data, for example, reports of stress at Week 6 corresponded with reports of relationship satisfaction at Week 5, discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week 3 corresponded with reports of individual mental well-being at Week 2, and so forth. In total, there were five sets of repeated measures, one for each pair of subsequent weeks (weeks one and two, two and three, three and four, four and five, five and six). Separate models were assessed for each dependent variable at Week *t*, for a total of two models. Relationship satisfaction and individual mental well-being at Week (*t*-1) were entered as predictors at Level-1. Reports of the corresponding dependent variable from the previous week (*t*-1) were included at Level-1 as control variables. Time was also entered as variable at Level-1 to determine if the dependent variables changed in a linear fashion over the course of the six weeks, independent of the predictor variables of interest. Time was coded such that Week 1 = 0, Week 2 = 1, Week 3 = 2, Week 4 = 3, Week 5 = 4, and Week 6 = 5. Slopes for relationship

satisfaction, mental well-being, and discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week (t-1) were allowed to randomly vary, as notated by u_{2j}, u_{3j}, and u_{4j} in the equations. Considering the study's duration was only six weeks and not all lengths of time were represented in this study, time was entered as a fixed factor without a random factor.

The following equations were used to model the influence of satisfaction and mental well-being on the subsequent week's reports of discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and stress.

Model 2: Discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at Week t

Level 1 Equation:

Discrepancies Week $t = \pi_{0j} + \pi_1$(Time) + π_2(Discrepancies Week t-1)

+ π_3(Relationship Satisfaction Week t-1) + π_4(Mental Well-being Week t-1) + $r$ij

Level 2 Equation: $\pi_{0j} = \beta_{00} + u_{0j}$

$\pi_{1j} = \beta_{10}$

$\pi_{2j} = \beta_{20} + u_{2j}$

$\pi_{3j} = \beta_{30} + u_{3j}$

$\pi_{4j} = \beta_{40} + u_{4j}$

Model 2: Stress at Week t

Level 1 Equation:

Stress Week $t = \pi_{0j} + \pi_1$(Time) + π_2(Stress Week t-1)

+ π_3(Relationship Satisfaction Week t-1) + π_4(Mental Well-being Week t-1) + $r$ij

Level 2 Equation: $\pi_{0j} = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}$ (Relationship Length) + β_{02} (Long Distance) + u_{0j}

$\pi_{1j} = \beta_{10}$

$\pi_{2j} = \beta_{20} + u_{2j}$

$\pi_{3j} = \beta_{30} + u_{3j}$

$\pi_{4j} = \beta_{40} + u_{4j}$

Results of the hierarchical linear models for discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards and stress can be found in Tables 6 and 7, respectively. Relationship satisfaction and

mental well-being in Week (*t*-1) did not predict discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards or stress in Week *t*. Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were not supported.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Future Directions

Research has consistently found that individuals are more dissatisfied with their relationships when partners do not meet their relational standards (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997), including their standard for openness (Afifi et al., 2012). Based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping, this project sought to understand the consequences of stress and coping with unmet openness standards for individuals and their relationships over time. To this end, two separate analyses—one cross-sectional and the other longitudinal—were conducted in order to assess the influence of stress and coping on relationship satisfaction and individual mental well-being over the course of six weeks. Generally, results from the cross-sectional analyses indicated that five of the ten coping strategies included in this study mediated the relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. Importantly, results not only indicated that certain coping strategies help to explain the relationship between stress and these outcomes, but also suggested that there are more and less productive ways to cope with unfulfilled openness standards in relationships. In other words, some coping strategies were found to buffer against the negative effects of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, while other coping strategies were found to enhance the negative effect of stress on these outcomes. Results from the longitudinal analyses indicated that relationship satisfaction and mental well-being do not predict discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards or the stress associated with these discrepancies the following week. Results from both sets of analyses are elaborated next, followed by a discussion of the contributions of this study, as well as the study's limitations and directions for future research.

Cross-sectional Analyses

As an initial step, the first set of hypotheses and research questions concerned the relationships between unfulfilled openness standards, stress, coping, and individual and relational outcomes. These predictions and questions were addressed using structural equation

modeling of the Week 1 data. It was predicted that discrepancies between the openness people expect from their partners and the openness they report their partners enacting would cause stress, and in turn, prompt individuals to cope. As a result of their coping efforts, it was predicted that relationship satisfaction and mental well-being would change.

It was interesting and surprising to find that unfulfilled openness standards were not related to mental well-being (H1) or stress (H2) in the structural equation models. Considering that openness standards were the basis for this study, these findings raise two important questions about the relative importance and influence of openness standards in newly dating relationships. First, why was it that unfulfilled openness standards were associated with relational satisfaction but not mental well-being? One reason is that a lack of openness may affect relational quality and not individuals' evaluations of self. This explanation is plausible considering that individuals expected openness *from* partners, and therefore a lack of openness was likely attributed to partners and resulted in dissatisfaction with them (e.g., "He or she is not being open, so I am unhappy with him or her").

The second question is, why was it that unfulfilled standards were not related to stress? It is possible that the way in which survey questions were worded influenced the associations found in this study. As discussed above, discrepancy scores may have served as a more global measure of the fulfillment of openness standards, while the measures of negative emotion were more specific assessments of how individuals responded to violations of openness when they did occur (even when standards usually were fulfilled or exceeded). Inasmuch as this was the case, individuals' standard for openness may have been generally met, though they may have reported feeling stressed in instances when their partner did violate their standard. Another possibility is that the emotions that were used to measure stress did not reflect how individuals felt when partners were not as open as expected. Specifically, the emotions used to measure stress in this study may have been too negative and intense to describe reactions to violations of openness that, based on the mean values, were relatively infrequent or minor. Perhaps it is more reasonable to expect individuals to feel disappointment or sadness, rather than anger, shame, or disgust.

Future research should investigate a wider range of emotions as responses to unmet openness standards.

For both questions above, it is also possible that relatively low means for both discrepancies and stress resulted in too little variability to find relationships between discrepancies, mental well-being, and stress. Generally, individuals in this study did have their standards met more often than not. This finding is counter to the rationale for selecting the current study's sample—that college-aged individuals in newly dating relationships would have high standards for openness that would be difficult for partners to meet. Also, individuals' relatively low reports of stress suggest that violations of openness were not very stressful. Perhaps openness was not as central or consequential to the relationships in this study as other facets of their relationship (e.g., physical attraction and similarity; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Lutz-Zois, Bradley, Mihalik, & Moorman-Eavers, 2006), such that any violations of openness that did occur may have been too infrequent or minor to cause individuals stress. Considering the individuals in this study were relatively satisfied with their relationships, it is also possible that they perceived their partners as meeting or exceeding their standard, which would also explain low mean stress levels. Because results did show that the stress and coping associated with violations of openness did have an impact on relational satisfaction and mental well-being, it is likely that discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards may have been associated with stress and mental well-being had more features of violations of openness been assessed. As a next step, future research could investigate the frequency and quality of violations of openness to understand the conditions under which having one's standard for openness go unmet causes stress, and by extension in the model, prompts coping and influences mental well-being. It may be the case that violations of openness occurring more often and concerning more important topics may have stronger associations with emotions such as jealousy, anger, and anxiety. In turn, these negative feelings may be more closely associated with mental well-being.

Despite failures to fully support the hypotheses concerning the influence of unfulfilled openness standards, results indicated that five of the coping strategies helped explain how stress

as a result of violations of openness was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and individual mental well-being. The first coping strategy, exiting, partially mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. Specifically, exiting was negatively related to both relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, ultimately increasing the overall negative effect of stress on these outcomes. The process of terminating the relationship may have exacerbated stress for individuals in this study, making them feel more negatively about the relationship while simultaneously decreasing their mental well-being. Indeed, research has found that individuals feel most distressed immediately following a breakup, though their distress lingers well-beyond the initial breakup period (Sprecher, Felmlee, Meets, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Further, individuals who have recently experienced a break up report feeling more anger and sadness (Sbarra & Emery, 2005) and less satisfaction with life (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Considering that these results are based on cross-sectional analyses, it may also be the case that decreased mental well-being and relationship satisfaction were catalysts for relationship termination; being unhappy with both one's life and one's relationship may have driven individuals to break up their relationships. This is consistent with decades of research on individual and relationship factors leading up to relationship dissolution, including dissatisfaction with the relationship (see Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010) and depression (Rosand, Slinning, Roysamb, & Tambs, 2013). Because individuals reported on a current dating relationship, it may be the case that individuals did not actually terminate the relationship as a way of coping, but instead threatened to break up or had thoughts about the relationship ending. In this way, individuals who wanted to end their relationship, but had not yet done so, may have felt more negatively about the relationship and themselves as a result (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). Conversely, individuals who were unhappy with their relationships and themselves may have been more likely to think about ending their relationships.

Second, the escaping coping strategy fully mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction and partially mediated the relationship between stress and mental well-

being. Escaping was negatively related to both outcome variables, thereby increasing the overall negative effect of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. These results are consistent with research that has found that neglecting (e.g., ignoring the problem, refusing to discuss problems) as a problem-solving strategy is associated with distress in dating relationships (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). When individuals in this study responded to stress by distracting themselves, they may have inadvertently strengthened the negative effects of stress on them and their relationship. That is, when individuals ignored their partner's lack of openness, they not only avoided dealing with the issue, but also engaged in behaviors that made them feel badly about themselves. These behaviors, based on the coping items presented to individuals in this study, may have included, but were not limited to, shopping, eating, and using drugs and alcohol. The activities individuals engaged in while distracting themselves may have introduced more problems into the relationship, particularly if individuals' coping behaviors were considered to be problematic by partners (e.g., drinking alcohol; Rodriguez, Overup, & Neighbors, 2013) or caused conflict.

Third, using humor as a coping strategy partially mediated the relationship between stress and relationship satisfaction (but not mental well-being). Specifically, using humor was positively related to relationship satisfaction, yet the overall effect of stress on relationship satisfaction remained negative. This suggests that using humor may buffer against the negative effects associated with stress. Joking or using sarcasm to address a partner's lack of openness could have served a cathartic function for individuals in this study. In other words, using humor may have helped individuals release the negative feelings they had when partners were not as open as expected. Or, humor may have been a way of reframing negative thoughts and feelings into more positive ones (Abel, 2002). In turn, individuals felt more positively, or at least less negatively, about their partners and relationships. Indeed, research has found that frequent use of positive humor in dating relationships is related to decreased relationship stress and increased relationship satisfaction (Vela, Booth-Butterfield, Wanzer, & Vallade, 2013). Another explanation for the findings is that using humor was a more effective way for individuals to

manage stress with partners. Research supports this reasoning; individuals whose partners use more affiliative and less aggressive humor during conflict report better problem resolution (Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008). Considering the cross-sectional nature of the data, the reverse association may be true; using humor may have predicted positive feelings about partners and relationships (e.g., Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010).

Fourth, the modeling coping strategy partially mediated the relationship between the stress associated with unmet openness standards and mental well-being. Specifically, modeling was positively associated with mental well-being, though the overall effect of stress on mental well-being remained negative. Put another way, modeling buffered one's mental well-being against the negative effects of stress. One possible explanation for these findings relates to individuals' interpretations of their efforts to please and set an example for their partners. When individuals engaged in modeling behaviors, they may have felt better about themselves knowing they have put forth effort in the relationship, though their partner may not be meeting expectations. Or, individuals could have been exhibiting the openness they expect from their partners, and in turn, received reciprocation of disclosures (e.g., Derlega et al., 1973). Alternatively, modeling as a coping strategy could have been a compensation technique (Burgoon, Dillman, & Stern, 1993). In this way, individuals' increased efforts to please their partner made up for their partner's less desirable behaviors in order to maintain satisfaction with the relationship.

Last, reframing as a coping strategy partially mediated the relationship between stress and mental well-being. Reframing was positively associated with mental well-being, which decreased the overall negative effect of stress on mental well-being. These results suggest that as individuals changed the way they evaluated their partners by thinking of the good things in the relationship and excusing partners' lack of openness, for example, they felt less depressed and more satisfied with life. These findings are consistent with the theory of stress and coping; perceptions of stress are contingent upon individuals' cognitive appraisals of situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Thus, by reappraising their partner's lack of openness in a positive manner,

individuals in this study reduced the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards, thereby increasing mental well-being. The results of this study are consistent with decades of stress and coping research across various fields (e.g., counseling; Matheny, Aycock, Pugh, Curlette, & Silva Cannella, 1986) and in a variety of contexts (e.g., health, occupations, and relationships) that illustrates the positive benefits of cognitive reappraisals for individuals' psychological well-being (Troy, Wilhelm, Shallcross, & Mauss, 2010). This explanation is also supported by research on attributions in relationships; individuals are motivated to excuse partners' instances of undesirable behavior in order to maintain global satisfaction with their relationship (McNulty & Karney, 2001). That reframing was not positively associated with relationship satisfaction suggests that reframing's benefits may be limited to the individual (rather than the relationship or the partner). This may be because reframing is individually-centered; individuals' stress is the target of reframing and individuals are the ones doing the reframing.

In sum, five (exiting, escaping, using humor, modeling, and reframing) of the ten coping strategies of interest in this study were found to at least partially mediate the relationship between the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being. Though these coping strategies varied in the direction (i.e., negative or positive) and strength in which they had an impact on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, they share similarities along several dimensions. For example, these five coping strategies may be considered indirect or passive strategies; for each, individuals do not directly confront partners about their unfulfilled openness standards. Even those strategies directed at partners (i.e., exiting and using humor) do not necessarily involve discussing partners' openness. Individuals may terminate relationships without cause, and humor can mask individuals' honest feelings. Considering individuals in this study were in newly dating relationships, it is likely they may not have felt comfortable bringing up sensitive issues like openness to their partners (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Openness may be perceived as "relationship talk" that threatens the relationship because a lack of openness may signal that the relationship is not progressing in

ways individuals expect. Constructive versus destructive is another way to categorize the five coping strategies; in this study, the more destructive strategies are those that hurt the individual, partner, or relationship (Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002). While individuals' intentions cannot be inferred from the data in this study, the consequences of certain coping strategies for individuals and their relationships may delineate destructive from constructive coping strategies. Because they were negatively related to relationship satisfaction and mental well-bring, exiting and escaping would be considered more destructive strategies, while using humor, modeling, and reframing would be considered more constructive strategies because of the positive impact they had on the outcome variables.

LONGITUDINAL ANALYSES

The second set of analyses in this study was longitudinal and concerned hypotheses predicting nonrecursive relationships between individual and relational outcomes and discrepancies in an unmet openness standard and stress. As coping is a process that changes over time, the goal of this portion of the study was to understand if and to what extent coping is effective at buffering against the negative effects of stress by assessing perceptions of the stressor (unfulfilled openness standards) and experiences of stress the following week. It was found that relationship satisfaction and mental well-being in the previous week did not predict unfulfilled openness standards or stress in the current week. Individuals in this study were relatively satisfied with their relationships and lives and reported relatively few depressive symptoms. Moreover, in any given week, about half of the participants in this study reported their standard for openness was met. Means for the discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards were low, even when the sample was divided to only include those individuals whose standard for openness was unmet. Thus, one explanation for the null findings is that a lack of variability in this study, or floor and ceiling effects, may have decreased power to detect the influence of relationship satisfaction and mental well-being on individuals' subsequent perceptions and experiences. Put another way, relationship satisfaction and mental well-being

may be related to subsequent reports of openness standard fulfillment and stress, but the ability to detect these effects was diminished in this study.

Another explanation for the null findings is that any distress individuals experienced in one week would not have been related to individuals' perceptions of partners' openness or individuals' experiences of stress the following week, even with enough power to detect associations. This is because violations of openness may not have been frequent or severe enough to have had an enduring influence on how individuals viewed their partners' communication the following week. Also, individuals' happiness in relationships is composed of many other facets that may outweigh infrequent and seemingly unimportant instances in which a partner does not disclose. Research suggests that salient issues for college dating relationships include the amount of time partners are able to spend together, considering that many of these relationships are long-distance (e.g., Maguire & Kinney, 2010), and the sexual health of the relationship (e.g., Perlman & Sprecher, 2012). In sum, when compared to other aspects of the relationship, violations of openness that occurred in this study may have not been very influential on relational quality and individual mental well-being.

A related explanation pertains to the contextual factors surrounding individuals' perceptions of their partner's openness. Individuals in this study may have had their standard for openness unmet; however, they may have also understood that partners disclose more or less based on factors such as location, mood, and frequency and duration of communication in that week. As college students, individuals in this sample likely spent less time with their partners during some weeks during the study, such as weeks in which they had exams and projects due (the reverse may be true during weeks that overlapped with Spring Break). A lack of communication may be particularly salient for individuals in long-distance relationships (LDRs), who already see their partners less frequently than those couples who are geographically close. From an uncertainty reduction perspective (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), individuals in this study may have also been more forgiving of their partner's lack of openness because of the novelty of the relationship. This is for two reasons: first, individuals may have understood the risks

involved with self-disclosing. Self-disclosure that is too rapid or personal may be just as harmful to relationship development as self-disclosure that is too infrequent or shallow. As a result, individuals may not have expected unfettered openness from their partners. Second, individuals in this study may have still been learning about their partners' communication styles and habits, and thus did not have a solid baseline from which to judge if and when their partner was being open with them, relative to other interactions. Together, these explanations suggest that a more contextual approach may further explicate what it is about "openness" that individuals expect in relationships. When individuals report a high standard for openness, to which topics are they referring? Under what conditions is a lack of openness permissible in a relationship characterized by openness otherwise? Taking such an approach would help answer these questions and be consistent with existing theoretical explanations of self-disclosure in relationships. For example, communication privacy management theory (e.g., Petronio, 2002), topic avoidance literature (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004), and multiple goals approaches (e.g., Caughlin, 2010) acknowledge that factors, motivations, and tensions underlie individuals' decisions to disclose. Future research on the fulfillment of openness standards could provide more nuanced explanations for stress and coping by incorporating principles of these theories and frameworks.

From the longitudinal analyses, several interesting findings should be noted pertaining to the control variables. First, discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards at any given week were predicted by discrepancies the previous week. In other words, discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards stayed relatively stable over the course of six weeks. A second, similar finding was that stress at any given week was predicted by stress the previous week. These two findings are perhaps not surprising considering the relatively high satisfaction and low discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards that individuals reported from week to week. It is likely individuals' relationships were relatively stable over the course of the six weeks, accounting for the consistency in individuals' reports of standards, partners' openness, and stress. Last, it was found that individuals in LDRs reported higher mean stress across the six weeks than individuals in geographically close relationships (GCRs). Research concerning the

challenges of LDRs sheds light on this finding. Individuals in LDRs in this study may have placed greater emphasis on frequency of visits and quality of communication than individuals in GCRs (Holt & Stone, 1988; Maguire & Kinney, 2010). As a result, they may have been more upset by violations of openness than individuals in GCRs. Also, individuals in LDRs may have felt that they had fewer coping strategies available to them to deal with their dissatisfaction. Considering that many coping strategies involve confronting the partner, it may have been difficult for some individuals to engage in strategies such as clarifying, or even exiting, particularly if they believed relationship issues are better handled face-to-face. One last explanation is that individuals in this study in LDRs idealized their partners more than individuals in GCRs (Stafford & Merolla, 2007), and were therefore more upset when partners violated their expectations for openness.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study contribute to existing literature in three important ways. The first relates to the importance of including stress as a variable in studies of coping. One of the primary goals of this study was to integrate stress into a model of coping with unfulfilled openness standards in order to provide a theoretical explanation for why individuals cope, and more specifically, why they choose certain strategies when doing so. Results indicated that the stress associated with unfulfilled openness standards was a strong predictor of most coping strategies, and though coping was able to, in some instances (e.g., modeling, reframing), reduce the negative effects of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, the negative effects of stress remained strong. As argued by Folkman and Lazarus (1984), if and how individuals cope depends on the degree to which they perceive the current situation interfering with their goals or violating their expectations (Lazarus, 1999). It was clear in this study, evidenced by strong correlations and path coefficients, that some individuals did a great deal of coping in response to the stress they associated with unfulfilled openness standards. Conversely, individuals who reported less stress were less likely to engage in coping. Because stress was a

strong predictor of both coping and relationship satisfaction and mental well-being outcomes, the findings of this study highlight the importance of including stress as a variable in research on stress and coping.

The second contribution this study makes to existing literature pertains to the strategies individuals use to cope with unfulfilled openness standards. Research has consistently found that individuals in relationships are more satisfied when their standards, such as that for openness, are met or exceeded (Alexander, 2004; Baucom et al., 1996b; Caughlin, 2003; Hall et al., 2011; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Similarly, when individuals feel they cannot speak to close others (e.g., dating partners or family members) about their thoughts and feelings, or that others are hiding information from them, they report less satisfaction with the relationship (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Golish, 2000; Vangelisti, 1994). Despite these findings, little empirical evidence has described how individuals deal with the dissatisfaction, anger, and disappointment they feel toward their partners and relationships when standards, such as that for openness, go unfulfilled (Boldero et al., 2009). Thus, another goal of this study was to refine and validate current understandings of the coping strategies individuals use when their standards for openness are unmet, and to identify the strategies that may be more or less effective at buffering against the negative effects of stress. Some research shows that individuals ruminate about their partner's lack of openness (Afifi et al., 2012). However, results from this study show that individuals respond to violations of openness in a variety of ways, some of which may resemble rumination, but most of which are very different. For example, individuals may have obsessively thought about their partner's lack of openness as they attempted to escape the issue or planned to exit the relationship, but the thoughts and behaviors associated with using humor, modeling, and reframing were likely more positive than rumination. Additionally, some coping strategies were found to buffer against the negative effects of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being (e.g., using humor, modeling, reframing), while other coping strategies were found to enhance the negative effect of stress on these outcomes (e.g., exiting, escaping). Thus, the findings of this study are consistent with other

stress and coping literature showing that there are more and less productive ways to cope in relationships. While more work is needed to validate the strategies individuals use to cope with unfulfilled openness standards, this study is an important first step in explicating the types of coping strategies individuals use, as well as assessing the relative impact of coping strategies on relational and individual outcomes.

Last, this study contributes to existing literature by assessing individual outcomes, in addition to relational consequences, associated with unfulfilled openness standards. Research has consistently found that individuals are more satisfied (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997; Alexander, 2004) and report greater marital adjustment (Baucom et al., 1996b) and relational quality (Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999) when standards are met or exceeded. At the same time, literature on stress and coping has suggested that coping has consequences for the individual beyond his or her satisfaction with the relationship. Specifically, decades of research has found that stress and coping in relationships affects individuals' psychological well-being (see Randall & Bodenmann, 2009, for a review). Further, research on coping and health outcomes has consistently supported the stress-buffering importance of social support (as coping) in relationships (Thoits, 1995, 2011). Thus, another goal of this study was to include individual mental well-being as an outcome variable, predicting that it would be influenced by both stress and coping. Results supported the inclusion of mental well-being in models of stress and coping with unfulfilled openness standards; not only did stress predict mental well-being, but the use of certain coping strategies was also associated with mental well-being. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of how stress and coping affect individuals and their relationships, future research should consider other relevant outcomes—not just relationship satisfaction and mental well-bring—that may be influenced by individuals' stress and coping.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The contributions of this study should be interpreted within its limitations. First, the sample size for the alternative structural models was small (N = 100). While there is no one

definitive rule for sample size, generally 100 cases or individuals is considered the absolute lowest sample size needed for structural equation modeling, and 200 is considered a typical sample size for most structural equation models (Kline, 2010). Another recommendation is that there are at least 20 cases or individuals for every one parameter estimated (Kline, 2010). Before trimming, each alternative structural model in this study estimated 15 paths, yielding a recommended sample size of at least 300 individuals. Future studies should increase sample size, which would yield more reliable scales, lower the probability of committing Type 1 errors, and increase power.

Additionally, future research should examine a sample with more diverse characteristics to include other types of relationships and different cultures. Individuals in newly dating relationships are likely to use different strategies than individuals in more long-term romantic relationships. As discussed above, individuals in newly dating relationships may be more hesitant to be direct with partners about issues that bother them. On the other hand, married individuals may be less likely to refrain from confronting partners about problems or grievances. Several lines of research support the notion that relationship status may affect individuals' stress and coping experiences. Similar to the finding of this study, Ptacek and Dodge (1995) found that younger couples were more likely to use less-useful coping strategies (e.g., venting emotions, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, and alcohol-drug disengagement) in their relationships than older couples. Also, a large body of literature has documented the health benefits of marriage (e.g., Hughes & Waite, 2009; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), including the coping resources (e.g., social, personal, economical) married individuals have that give them an advantage over unmarried individuals (Marcussen, 2005; Thoits, 1987). Because research suggests relationship length and type influences individuals' stress and coping, future research should study relationships of varying lengths and types.

Another limitation concerning the sample of this study involves attrition. As seen in Table 1 and described in Footnote 1, participation in the study decreased over time. At Wave 1, 203 individuals participated, but by Wave 6, just 118 participants remained. Attrition is an issue

with longitudinal studies, as it weakens power to find relationships among the variables, and importantly, has the potential to bias findings if non-participation does not occur at random. One possible reason individuals discontinued participation is that the items in the survey made them feel badly about their stress, coping, or relationship. Participants may have not considered coping in certain ways (e.g., *using humor*, *clarifying*) before participating in this study. If the study drew their attention to shortcomings in their coping strategies, it may have been a painful reminder of the relatively low quality of their relationship. In turn, they may have chosen to drop out of the study. This may explain why relational satisfaction was found to be relatively high, and discrepancies in the fulfillment of openness standards relatively low—participants who opted out of the study were less happy in their relationships than those who remained in the study. Another reason for non-participation may involve individuals' schedules. Some individuals may have been unable to complete a survey due to other time commitments, some may have forgotten to complete a survey, and some may have found participation on a weekly basis for 6 weeks too taxing. For certain, some individuals stopped participating in this study because their relationship ended in a given week. These individuals, because they did not have a relationship on which to report, were not invited to complete the remaining weeks' surveys. Future research should assess the differences in openness standards, stress, coping, and outcomes between those individuals who remained in the study and those who stopped participating (and more specifically, those whose relationships ended) to assess whether the variables under investigation were influenced by, or perhaps responsible for, attrition.

Also, this study is grounded in a cultural assumption that individuals desire openness in their relationships, and that openness has positive effects on individuals and their relationships. A growing body of literature disputes this ideology of openness (see Bochner, 1982). For example, findings of topic avoidance research challenge the blanket assumption that openness is unconditionally desired and beneficial to relationships. Numerous studies have reported topic avoidance may not only be preferable, but also functional, depending on the perceived motivations for avoiding (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Moreover,

different cultures may hold different beliefs about the importance of openness in relationships. Individuals from Western cultures, which are considered more low context, may hold higher expectations for openness because they rely more on explicit verbal communication for understanding (Hall, 1976). In contrast, individuals from high context cultures may be less dependent on overt disclosures for information about their partners and relationships (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984). Applied to the current study, predictions in the opposite direction may have been supported; because individuals from high context cultures expect less openness, individuals from these cultures would have actually been distressed when partners were more open than they were expected to be. Ultimately, including a more diverse sample of relationships and cultures in future studies would deepen understanding of the complexities and challenges of navigating openness in relationships.

Another limitation of the data concerns issues related to timing; the length of time between surveys and the length of the study may have influenced how individuals reported on the variables. One of the challenges of collecting longitudinal data in this study was that not all participants responded to a survey exactly one week from completion of the previous week's survey. Some responded within a few days of completing the previous week's survey, whereas others waited more than a week to complete a current week's survey. Unequal time intervals between survey responses may have influenced participants' ability to recall experiences, as well as skewed the salience of their feelings. For example, an individual who responds to a survey just days after completing the previous survey is likely to have fewer instances of violations of openness upon which to draw, and he or she is less likely to report stress and coping in the current week's survey. Even if participants did respond to surveys exactly one week apart, a six-week study may too short a time period to catch fluctuations in the variables under investigation. Generally, global evaluations of relationship quality are stable over time (see McNulty & Karney, 2001). Further, reported use of coping strategies may change over the lifetime of a relationship. As discussed above, some coping strategies may not be used early in the relationship (e.g., those that threaten the relationship), and some coping strategies may not be

perceived as useful or appropriate to use until later in the relationship (e.g., those that are more direct). Ultimately, future studies could improve upon the issues of timing found in this study by requiring participants to complete surveys at equal increments of time, controlling for discrepancies between the number of days it should have taken participants to complete the survey and the number of days they actually took to do so, changing the increments of time used to collect data from weeks to months or even years, and extending the length of the study.

While this study did include longitudinal data, it is important to note that findings do not support causality. Instead, findings from both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses introduce more questions about other variables that may explain the nonsignificant relationships between variables in this study. For example, future studies should explore other variables that may predict coping strategies. In this study, clarifying was the most commonly reported coping strategy and was strongly associated with relationship satisfaction, but it was not related to stress. What, then, prompts individuals to cope, if not stress? It may be the case that even when faced with stress, individuals draw upon other relationship resources, such as commitment, to cope in ways that maintain relational quality (Alexander, 2004, 2008). Or, decisions to cope may be influenced by individual preferences and personality, such as the Big Five personality traits. A recent meta-analysis revealed that primary (i.e., changing the situation or one's emotions) and secondary (i.e., adapting to the stressor) control coping strategies are positively associated with all personality traits except neuroticism (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Those who score highly on neuroticism are more likely to disengage by denying or avoiding the issue. Similarly, those higher in neuroticism are less resilient, even when problem- and emotion-focused coping are taken into account (Campbell-Sills, Cohan, & Stein, 2006). In sum, future studies could extend the findings of this study by exploring both the individual and relationship resources individuals draw upon when faced with stress that influences coping decisions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

More research is also needed refine and validate the coping measure used in this study. Alpha reliabilities were very low for several of the coping strategy subscales (e.g., *reframing*,

escaping, *modeling*), and others were barely acceptable (e.g., *distancing*, *self-disparaging*, *punishing*). Considering the measure used in this study was just created in a previous study (Alexander, 2004) and was modified to fit the needs of the current study, more work should be done to develop a valid and reliable measure of coping with unfulfilled open standards. Future research could revisit the items carefully to consider whether there are conceptual differences between the items for a given coping strategy. As an example, for the *reframing* coping strategy, it may the case that "believing that my partner's behavior will improve over time" is not the conceptually similar to "accepting that my partner will always be different from me." In fact, those statements may not belong to the same coping strategy because the former involves an evaluation of quality, whereas the latter involves an evaluation of similarity. Further, it may be necessary to increase the number of items for those strategies with too few, such as *distancing*, which only had two items. Revising, testing, and re-testing the coping measure would hopefully produce not only a more valid measure that ensures researchers are accurately capturing individuals' coping behaviors, but also a more reliable measure that would give researchers greater power to detect possible relationships between coping and other variables of interest.

Finally, future research should also include the partner's data in order to assess the influence of perceptions of, and responses to, individuals' stress and coping. This not only would allow for comparisons between what individuals *say* they do to cope and what partners report individuals' coping strategies to be, but also would provide explanations for the relationships between stress, coping, and individual and relational outcomes in this study. For example, Rusbult and colleagues (1986) found that distress in couples was predicted by perceptions of a partner's tendency to use exit and neglect as problem-solving strategies. Thus, it may be the case that partners responded negatively to individuals' use of certain coping strategies in this study, thus exacerbating individuals' negative evaluations of themselves and the relationship. In other words, partners' responses to individuals' coping may mediate the relationship between coping and relational and individual outcomes. One last reason to study dyads relates the importance of similarity in couples' coping styles for relationships. What are functional or effective coping

strategies for couples may be less influenced by the type of coping strategies used, and more influenced by the similarity of coping styles between partners. Research on perceptions of coping in couples supports this idea. For example, in a study of dating and married couples, Ptacek and Dodge (1995) found that regardless of whether the coping strategy was constructive, when partners believed they coped in similar ways, they both reported more satisfaction with the relationship. Similarly, congruence in perceptions that the other partner gives as much as one does is a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than actual coping (Iafrate, Bertoni, Margola, Cigoli, & Acitelli, 2012).

Conclusion

The overarching goal of this study was to explore the stress and coping behaviors of individuals in response to an unmet openness standard in order to shed light on how individuals maintain relatively satisfying relationships, though they may experience disappointment within them. Results not only indicated that five of the ten coping strategies (exiting, using humor, modeling, reframing, and escaping) at least partially explained the relationship between stress and these outcomes, but also suggested that there are more and less productive ways to cope with unfulfilled openness standards in relationships. In order words, some coping strategies were found to buffer against the negative effects of stress on relationship satisfaction and mental well-being, while other coping strategies were found to enhance the negative effect of stress on these outcomes. Results from the longitudinal analyses did not support the predictions that relationship and individual outcomes in one week predict perceptions of partner's openness or stress in the following week. In light of its limitations, this study provides theoretical explanations as to why and how individuals choose to respond to violations of openness in their relationships, and in turn, how this process affects their relationship satisfaction and individual mental well-being.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT ADVERTISEMENT

To CMS instructors:

We are conducting research on dating relationships and are recruiting participants from undergraduate courses in the Communication Studies department. If you are interested in an opportunity for your students to earn extra credit, we would appreciate you allowing us to recruit your students. We can visit your classroom and present this opportunity at a time that is convenient for you. After the data are collected, you will be given a list of students in your class who participated. Please contact Charee at charee.mooney@utexas.edu if you have any questions.

Title: Openness in Dating Relationships (IRB#: 2012-11-0040)

Researchers: Charee Mooney (Co-Principal Investigator)
Dr. Anita L. Vangelisti (Professor and Co-Principal Investigator)

To CMS students:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of communication in dating relationships. Your participation is completely voluntary.

You are eligible to participate if:

- You are currently in a dating relationship of **no more than 6 months**.
- You are 18 years of age or older.

Approximately 200 people will participate in this study. You will be asked to report your opinions and experiences in an online survey **once per week for six weeks**. At the end of the six weeks, you will receive extra credit (see instructor for number of points) AND be entered into a drawing for 1 of 4 $25 VISA giftcards.
To access the survey, please click on the link below.
http://texascommunication.qualtrics.com/XXXXX
The password is: cmsdatingsurvey

We appreciate your help, and please contact Charee Mooney at charee.mooney@utexas.edu if you have any questions.

Thank you!

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APPENDIX B: INTERNET SURVEY CONSENT FORM

You have been invited to participate in a survey, entitled "What happens when the standard for standard for openness goes unmet in romantic relationships?: A longitudinal analysis of stress, coping, and individual and relational consequences." The study is being conducted by Charee Mooney and Dr. Anita Vangelisti of the department of Communication Studies of The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station A1105, Austin, Texas 78712. You can reach us at 512-471-1948 or charee.mooney@utexas.edu.

The purpose of this study is to examine the communication in dating relationships. Your participation in the survey will contribute to a better understanding of how individuals negotiate openness in dating relationship. The study's duration is 6 weeks; one survey per week for 6 weeks. If you consent to participant, the first questionnaire that follows herein will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. At the end, you will be redirected to a different webpage and asked for your email address so that next week's survey link will be emailed to you (in one week from today). Please note your email address will be kept separate from your responses to the survey. The remaining five surveys are expected to take no more than 20 minutes to complete. You are free to contact the investigator at the above address and phone number to discuss the survey.

Risks to participants are considered minimal. There will be no costs for participating, nor will you benefit from participating. Identification associated with names (for extra credit and giftcard drawing purposes) and email addresses (for sending survey reminders) will be kept during the data collection phase for tracking purposes only. Please note this information will be collected separate from your responses to each of the surveys and your name and email address will be deleted from record once the study (six weeks) has ended and your instructor has been notified of your participation.

A limited number of research team members will have access to the data during data collection and results may be presented at professional conferences or in peer-reviewed journals.
Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. If you wish to withdraw from the study or have any questions, contact the investigator listed above.

If you have any questions, please call Charee Mooney at 512-471-1948 or send an email to charee.mooney@utexas.edu. You may also request a hard copy of the survey from the contact information above.

If you would like to receive credit but do not want to participate in this study, please talk to your instructor about completing the alternative assignment. The alternative assignment should be equivalent in time and effort that would be needed to participate in this study.

This study has been processed by the Office of Research Support. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - the Office of Research Support by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

IRB Number: **[2012-11-0040]**

If you agree to participate please press the arrow button at the bottom right of the screen otherwise use the X at the upper right corner to close this window and disconnect.

Thank you.

APPENDIX C: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STUDY APPROVAL LETTER

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

P.O. Box 7426, Austin, Texas 78713 · Mail Code A3200
(512) 471-8871 · FAX (512) 471-8873

FWA # 00002030

Date: 01/15/13

PI: Anita L Vangelisti

Dept: Communication Studies

Title: What happens when the standard for openness goes unmet in romantic relationships?

Re: IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2012-11-0040

Dear Anita L Vangelisti:

Recognition of Exempt status based on 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Qualifying Period: 01/15/2013 to 01/14/2016. *Expires 12 a.m. [midnight] of this date.*
A continuing review report must be submitted in three years if the research is ongoing.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:

Research that is determined to be Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review is not exempt from ensuring protection of human subjects. The following criteria to protect human subjects must be met. The Principal Investigator (PI):

1. Assures that all investigators and co-principal investigators are trained in the ethical principles, relevant federal regulations, and institutional policies governing human subject research.

2. Will provide subjects with pertinent information (e.g., risks and benefits, contact information for investigators and IRB Chair) and ensures that human subjects will voluntarily consent to participate in the research when appropriate (e.g., surveys, interviews).

3. Assures the subjects will be selected equitably, so that the risks and benefits of the research are justly distributed.

4. Assures that the IRB will be immediately informed of any information or unanticipated problems that may increase the risk to the subjects and cause the category of review to be reclassified to expedited or full board review.

5. Assures that the IRB will be immediately informed of any complaints from subjects regarding their risks and benefits.

6. Assures that confidentiality and privacy of the subjects and the research data will be maintained appropriately to ensure minimal risks to subjects.

7. Will report, by amendment, any changes in the research study that alter the level of risk to subjects.

These criteria are specified in the PI Assurance Statement that was signed before determination of exempt status was granted. The PI's signature acknowledges that they understand and accept these conditions. Refer to the Office of Research Support (ORS) website www.utexas.edu/irb for specific information on training, voluntary informed consent, privacy, and how to notify the IRB of unanticipated problems.

1. Closure: Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the ORS.

2. Unanticipated Problems: Any unanticipated problems or complaints must be reported to the IRB/ORS immediately. Further information concerning unanticipated problems can be found in the IRB Policies and Procedure Manual.

3. Continuing Review: A Continuing Review Report must be submitted if the study will continue beyond the three year qualifying period.

4. Amendments: Modifications that affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as an amendment. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB Program Coordinator(s) to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment. The IRB Program Coordinator(s) can help investigators determine if a formal amendment is necessary or if the modification does not require a formal amendment process.

If you have any questions contact the ORS by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,

James P. Wilson

James Wilson, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

APPENDIX D: OPENNESS STANDARD FULFILLMENT MEASURE

(Alexander, 2004, 2008)

Individuals have standards for their relationships. For example, the standard for openness states that your partner should be willing to talk openly about his or her thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

How important is this standard to you in your dating relationship?
Very Unimportant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Overall, to what extent has this standard been fulfilled in your current dating relationship?
Not At All 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Much So

APPENDIX E: STRESS MEASURE

(Adapted from Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

Think about your partner's communication with you in the past week. How did his or her openness, or lack thereof, make you feel? Please rate the extent to which the following emotions reflect how you felt about his or her communication.

The emotion does not correspond to how you felt right then	The emotion partly corresponds to how you felt right then	The emotion fairly well corresponds to how you felt right then	The emotion completely corresponds to how you felt right then
1	3	5	7

1. Anger
2. Anxiety
3. Fright
4. Guilt
5. Shame
6. Sadness
7. Envy
8. Jealousy
9. Disgust
10. Happiness
11. Pride
12. Relief
13. Hope
14. Love
15. Compassion

APPENDIX F: COPING STRATEGIES MEASURE

(Adapted from Alexander, 2004, 2008)

When my partner was not as open as I expected him or her…..

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Does NOT describe my reaction at all — Describes my reaction completely

Punishing

1. I cope by attempting to make my partner feel guilty.
2. I cope by punishing my partner for the issue.
3. I cope by arguing with my partner about the issue.
4. I cope by purposefully trying to hurt my partner for the issue.
5. I cope by attempting to get even with him/her.
6. I cope by reprimanding my partner for the issue.
7. I cope by threatening detrimental consequences if the problem were to reoccur.

Clarifying

8. I cope by discussing the issue with my partner.
9. I cope by expressing my feelings and desires to my partner.
10. I cope by working with my partner to make a plan to fix the problem.
11. I cope by negotiating with my partner to make changes in our relationship.
12. I cope by directly confronting my partner about the issue.

Reframing

13. I cope by believing that my partner is putting forth effort in the relationship.
14. I cope by making a special effort to understand my partner as being different from others.
15. I cope by accepting that my partner will always be different from me.
16. I cope by thinking about the good things in my relationship that outweigh the bad.
17. I cope by believing that my partner's behavior was unintentional.
18. I cope by believing that my partner's behavior will improve over time.

Self-disparaging

19. I cope by deciding that it is something that I am "used to."
20. I cope by deciding that I am wrong to hold the standard in the first place.
21. I cope by blaming myself for the situation.
22. I cope by convincing myself that I'm asking for too much in the relationship anyway.
23. I cope by telling myself that I brought the problem upon myself—my partner is not to blame.

Modeling

24. I try to meet my partner's standards so that he/she will feel compelled to return the same effort in our relationship.
25. I cope by increasing my efforts to please and attract my partner.
26. I cope by doing "extra things" such as buying gifts, doing favors, or giving extra affection to encourage my partner to please me.
27. I cope by setting an example of the behavior I expect from my partner.

Exiting

28. I cope by breaking up the relationship.
29. I cope by terminating the relationship.

Seeking Social Support

30. I cope by seeking opinions and information from friends, family, a counselor/therapist, or other sources.
31. I cope by seeking aid from friends or family.

Escaping

32. I cope by escaping the issue through different diversions such as eating and shopping.
33. I cope by distracting myself with the use of alcohol and other drugs.
34. I cope by keeping myself busy with various activities.

Distancing

35. I cope by remaining quiet or distant until my partner discovers the issue on his/her own.
36. I cope by giving my partner a "cold shoulder."

Using Humor

37. I cope by using sarcasm to show my disapproval of my partner's behavior.
38. I cope by using humorous remarks to show my discontent with my partner.

APPENDIX G: INDIVIDUAL MENTAL HEALTH MEASURES

1. Satisfaction with Life

(Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985)

Choose the response for each statement which best describes how often you felt – DURING THE PAST WEEK.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

2. Depression

(Radloff, 1977)

Choose the number for each statement which best describes how often you felt or behaved this way – DURING THE PAST WEEK.

Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)	Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)	Occasionally or a moderate amount of the time (3-4 days)	Most or all of the time (5-7 days)
0	1	2	3

1. I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me
2. I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor
3. I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family and friends
4. I felt that I was just as good as other people
5. I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing
6. I felt depressed
7. I felt that everything I did was an effort
8. I felt hopeful about the future
9. I thought my life had been a failure
10. I felt fearful
11. My sleep was restless
12. I was happy
13. I talked less than usual
14. I felt lonely
15. People were unfriendly
16. I enjoyed life
17. I had crying spells
18. I felt sad
19. I felt that people disliked me
20. I could not get "going"

APPENDIX H: RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION MEASURE

(Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986)

We would like you to think about your relationship with your dating partner during the last week, and use the following words and phrases to describe it. For example, if you think that your relationship with partner during the last week has been very miserable, put an X in the space right next to the word "miserable." If you think it has been very enjoyable, put an X in the space right next to "enjoyable." If you think it has been somewhere in between, put an X where you think it belongs. PUT AN X IN ONE SPACE ON EVERY LINE.

Miserable: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Enjoyable

Hopeful: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Discouraging

Free: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Tied down

Empty: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Full

Interesting: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Boring

Rewarding: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Disappointing

Doesn't give me much chance: ____ ____ ____ ___ ____ ____ ___ :Brings out the best in me

Lonely: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Friendly

Hard: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Easy

Worthwhile: ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ :Useless

All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your partner over the last week? Place an X in the space that best describes how satisfied you have been.

____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

Satisfied completely Neutral Completely dissatisfied

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Vita

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